A NEW "GRAY PHANTOM" DECTE E STORY



GRAY
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A Mystery Story of New York's Lower East Side

THE GRAY PHANTOM'S RETURN

By HERMAN LANDON

The story begins with the discovery of the mysterious murder of Sylvanus Gage, in the room which he occupied back of his cigar store in East Houston street.

All the elements surrounding the murder, and the methods used, point to the "Gray Phantom," the "beloved crook," as the perpetrator of the crime.

The story fairly bristles with adventure, including desperate encounters with the police, exciting chases over tenement roofs, hairbreadth escapes, exchanged personalities—in fact, every thrill imaginable to satisfy the lover of mystery stories.

The reader will find an agreeable romance to lend added interest to this clever and exciting mystery story.

Another Book by Herman Landon:
THE GRAY PHANTOM

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The Gray Phantom's Return

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By HERMAN LANDON

AUTHOR OF
"The Gray Phantom"



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THE GRAY PHANTOM'S RETURN

CHAPTER I

FROM DYING LIPS

PATROLMAN JOSHUA PINTO, walking his beat at two o'clock in the morning, hummed a joyless tune as he turned off the Bowery and swung into East Houston Street. It was a wet night, with a raw wind sweeping around the street corners, and Pinto walked along with an air of dogged persistence, as if trying to make the best of a disagreeable duty. His heavy and somewhat florid features were expressionless. For all that his face indicated, he might have been thinking that it was a fine night for a murder, or wishing that he was in plain clothes instead of uniform, or picturing himself in his cozy home playing with his baby, whose lusty "da-da's" and "goo-goo's" he was pleased to interpret as wonderful linguistic achievements.

Perhaps it was nothing but instinct that caused him to slow down his pace as he passed a squatty and rather dilapidated building in the middle of the block. So far as appearances went, it did not differ greatly from its drab and unprepossessing neighbors, yet Pinto cast a sharp glance at the ground-floor window, which bore a lettered sign proclaiming that the premises were occupied by Sylvanus Gage, dealer

in pipes, tobacco, and cigars. As if the building had cast a spell of gloom upon him, the patrolman ceased his humming, and his lips were set in a tight line as he proceeded down the block.

Being an ambitious and hard-working officer, Pinto made it a practice to cultivate the acquaintance of as many as possible of the people living along his beat. He knew Sylvanus Gage, a thin, stoop-shouldered man with a flowing beard, a black cap adorning his bald skull, and mild blue eyes that had a habit of gazing lugubriously at the world through thick lenses rimmed with tarnished gold. Despite his patriarchal appearance, he was reputed to be using his tobacco business as a cloak for a flourishing traffic in stolen goods. So deftly did the old man manage his illicit enterprises that the police, though morally certain of their facts, had never been able to produce any evidence against him. Little was known of his housekeeper, a sour and sharp-tongued slattern of uncertain age, but there were those who suspected that she was not entirely innocent of complicity in her employer's clandestine activities.

It may have been of this Pinto was thinking as he plodded along with the measured gait of the seasoned patrolman. The soggy sidewalks glistened in the light from the street-corner lamps, and here and there along the pavement water was forming in little pools. Most of the windows were dark and, save for an occasional shifty-eyed and furtively slinking pedestrian, the streets were deserted. Pinto halted for a moment to look at his watch, then quickened his steps, "pulled" the buff-colored box on the corner, and trudged on again.

Once more he was humming a tune. Each of the scattered prowlers he met was subjected to a critical scrutiny out of the corner of his eye. Now and then

he dodged into a dark doorway and tried a lock. From time to time he glanced through the window of a store or shop. It was all a matter of habit with Joshua Pinto. For seven years he had pursued the same dull routine, varied only by an occasional transfer to another part of the city, or by a change from night to day duty, or vice versa. He had broken up a few nocturnal street brawls, now and then he had foiled the designs of a second-story artisan, and on two or three occasions he had caught a safe-blower red-handed, but nothing very exciting had ever happened to him.

On this particular night, however, an acute observer might have noticed an air of disquietude about Officer Pinto. There was the merest hint of uneasiness in the way he twirled his nightstick as he walked along, in the intensified alertness with which he inspected the occasional passers-by, in the quick and somewhat nervous glances he cast up and down the shabby streets. Likely as not the rain and the wind, together with the gloom pervading the district, were responsible for his state of mind, and possibly his physical discomfort was aggravated by a premonition —though Pinto himself would have called it a "hunch"—that a tragic event was soon to enliven the tedium of his existence.

Again his footsteps dragged as once more he strolled past the establishment of Sylvanus Gage. The building was dark and still, like most of the others in the block, yet something prompted Pinto to cast a suspicious glance at the door and windows, as if he sensed an omen in the shadows clinging to the wall.

He stopped abruptly as a door slammed and a shrill feminine voice called his name. A woman, scantily dressed and with loosened hair fluttering in

the wind, was hurrying toward him with excited gestures.

"Officer!" She clutched his sleeve and pointed toward the tobacco shop. "There—hurry!"

The patrolman's eyes followed her pointing finger. A second-story window opened above their heads and a frowsy person, disturbed by the woman's harsh voice, looked down into the street. Pinto regarded the speaker with apparent unconcern, recognizing the housekeeper of Sylvanus Gage. Another window opened across the street, and a second face looked down on them.

Officer Pinto, schooled by previous experiences with overexcited females, casually inquired what might be the matter.

"Matter!" retorted the woman. "Murder—that's what's the matter. Why don't you get a move on?"

Pinto permitted himself to be led along. The driver of a milk wagon halted his nag to watch the commotion. The woman, jabbering and shivering, opened the door of the tobacco store, pushed the officer inside and switched on the light above the counter.

"There!" She pointed at a door in the rear of the dingy shop. "He—Mr. Gage—sleeps back there."

"Well, what of it?" An impatient look cloaked Pinto's real feelings. "He's got to sleep some place, ain't he?"

The woman's eyes blazed. "You stand there handing out sass while he—he may be dying back there." Trying to steady herself, she gathered up the folds of the tattered robe she wore. "My room's right above his," she explained. "A few moments

ago I jumped out of bed, thinking I'd heard a sound."

"A sound, eh? This town is chockfull of them things." Pinto leveled an uneasy glance at the door in the rear. "What kind of sound was it you thought you heard?"

"What kind of sound! You ain't paid for asking fool questions, Officer Pinto. All day long I felt in my bones that something awful was going to happen, and when that noise woke me up I was scared stiff. I grabbed a few clothes and ran down here, but the door to Mr. Gage's room was bolted on the inside. He always shoots the bolt before he goes to bed. I knocked, but not a sound came from the inside. Then I shouted loud enough to raise the dead, but——"

"Your boss is hard of hearing, ain't he?"

"A little. Say, why don't you do something?"

Pinto walked to the outer door, shooed away a knot of curious spectators, then sauntered back to where the woman stood. There was a supercilious grin on his lips, but deep in his eyes lurked an uneasy gleam.

"So you've been feeling in your bones that something awful was going to happen," he gibingly observed. "Then you hear a noise, and right away you yell murder. You've got *some* imagination, you have. I ain't going to break in on a sleeping man just because your bones feel funny. Mine do, too, once in a while, but I don't make any fuss about it. No, sir-ee! You might as well trot back to bed."

The woman pulled at the folds of her robe. "I haven't told you all yet." She spoke fast and low, gazing fixedly at the door in the rear. "Yesterday afternoon Mr. Gage got a letter from—from a party he's got good reason to be scared of. He

hadn't heard from him in years, and he'd been hoping he was rid of him for good. Well, I was watching him while he read the letter, and I saw him turn white as a sheet. Later, while he was out to lunch, I went to his desk and read the letter. I was just that curious. It told Mr. Gage that the writer would call on him inside forty-eight hours."

"Was that all?"

"All but the name at the bottom—and the name was the main thing."

"Eh?"

"It was the name of the man Mr. Gage has been afraid of all these years. When I saw that name at the bottom of the note I felt a chill all over. Say," raising her voice, "why don't you break in that door?"

Pinto stroked his chin, as if strongly impressed by what the woman had told him. Another group of spectators had gathered at the entrance, and he gruffly ordered them to disperse. Then he faced the inner door, turned the knob, pushed. The door did not yield, and he looked back over his shoulder.

"Whose name was signed to the note?" he demanded.

A look of awe crossed the housekeeper's face. She raised a bony arm and steadied herself against the counter. A grayish pallor had suffused her shriveled features.

"I—I can't tell you," she whispered. "I mustn't. Hurry—for Heaven's sake!"

Something of her excitement seemed to have been communicated to Pinto, but even now he appeared loath to attack the door.

"If your boss was so all-fired scared of the guy that sent him the note, why didn't he call up the police?" he queried suspiciously. Then a look of comprehension dawned in his face. "I guess, though,

that he wasn't very anxious to have the department butt into his affairs, and maybe he thought the other fellow's bite was worse'n his bark. Well, here goes."

He stepped back a few paces, squared his shoulders for action, then hurled his massive figure against the door. The woman stood rigid, straining forward a little, yet holding her hands before her face as if dreading the sight that might meet her eyes. Again and again Pinto flung his body against the door, and finally, with a crash and a long splintering sound, it flew open, precipitating him headlong into the inner room.

A queer sound rose in the woman's throat and she lowered her hands. She made as if to follow the policeman, but something held her back. From where she stood, staring through the doorway, she could see that the inner room was dark, and she heard the policeman's grunts and mutterings as he struggled to regain his feet. Then came an interval of silence, broken only by groping footfalls, and presently a light appeared in the rear. Pinto had found the electric switch.

The housekeeper shuddered as an exclamation issued from the other room. Evidently the officer had discovered something. Crouching in front of the counter, she strained her ears, listening. Pinto was speaking in low, quick accents, but she could not make out the words, and she heard no answering voice.

Finally, Pinto came out. His face was a little white and his lips were set in a tight line.

"He's dead," he declared.

The woman shrank back against the counter. "Murdered?"

The officer bawled a command to the neck-craning group at the entrance to stand back. Without

answering the housekeeper's question, he looked quickly about the store till he spied a telephone on a shelf behind the counter. The woman listened abstractedly as he called a number and spoke a few words into the transmitter. Then he stepped out from behind the counter and faced her.

"Your boss is lying on the floor in there," he announced, jerking his huge head toward the inner room, "with a knife wound in his chest. He was breathing his last just as I got to him."

The housekeeper jerked herself up, a look of sullen passion in her blanched face. "Breathing his last, was he?" Her voice was loud and shrill. "Then he wasn't dead yet! If you'd hurried, as I told you to, we might have saved his life. I'll report you for this, Officer Pinto."

"Cut that stuff! Nothing could have saved him. He was too far gone. Say," and Pinto bored his sharp eyes into her twitching face, "what name was signed to that letter?"

Twice she opened her lips to speak, but no words came.

"Out with it! You've got to tell me now."

The woman swallowed. "Why do you want to know?" she asked faintly.

"I've got a reason. Just as Gage was drawing his last breath, I got down beside him and asked him if he could tell me who stabbed him. I guess he read my lips; anyhow, he was able to whisper a name. I want to know if it jibes with the name signed to the letter Gage got yesterday."

"Well, then"—she pressed her hands against her breast—"the name on the letter was the Gray Phantom's."

Pinto ejaculated hoarsely.

"It jibes, all right!" he declared.

CHAPTER II

THE MISSING BAUBLE

JUST then a youngish man with a slouching gait and a dead cigar between his teeth pushed through the little knot of spectators at the entrance and leveled a mildly inquisitive glance at Pinto and the housekeeper.

The patrolman, after introducing the new arrival as Lieutenant Culligore of the detective bureau, told briefly what he had discovered.

Culligore doffed his dripping raincoat and banged his soggy slouch hat against the counter. His dull face and sluggish manners gave the impression that he was never quite awake, but now and then a furtive little gleam in his cinnamon-colored eyes betrayed a saving sense of humor. He seemed unimpressed until Pinto reached that point in his story where the dying man had told the name of his assailant. Then Culligore curled up his lip against the tip of his nose, as was his habit when interested in something, and motioned the patrolman to follow him into the inner room.

There was an indefinable air about the chamber that vaguely suggested the abode of one whose life is hidden from the world. The ragged carpet and the ancient wall paper were of neutral tones, and the atmosphere was stale and oppressive, as if seldom freshened by sun or wind. Lieutenant Culligore's drowsily blinking eyes traveled over the scene, yet he

appeared to see nothing. The safe in a corner seemed rather too large for the modest requirements of a tobacconist. Near by stood an ink-stained writing desk and a chair. The clothing on the narrow iron cot looked as though the occupant, suddenly disturbed in his sleep, had sprung from it in a hurry.

In the center of the room lay a curiously twisted figure, garbed in pajamas of pink flannel. Over the heart was a dull stain, and the right arm lay across the chest in a manner hinting that the dead man had used his last ounce of strength to ward off a blow. One of the legs was drawn up almost to the abdomen, and the eyes were fixed on the ceiling in a glassy stare.

"Well, Pinto?" Culligore looked as though he expected the patrolman to do the necessary thinking.

"The corpse told me the Gray Phantom did it," said Pinto in a tone of finality. "Don't you think we'd better start a general alarm, sir?"

"Corpses are sometimes mistaken, Pinto." The lieutenant fumbled for a match and slowly kindled his cigar. "I'll bet a pair of pink socks that the Phantom had nothing to do with this. The Phantom always fought clean. I'd hate like blue blazes to think that he pulled off this job."

Pinto scowled a little, as if he couldn't quite understand why Culligore should reject an easy solution of the mystery when it came to him ready-made.

"By the way," and Culligore fixed an indolent eye on the electric fixture above the desk, "was the light on or off when you broke in?"

"It was off, sir. I turned it on myself."

Culligore thought for a moment. "Well, that doesn't mean much. The murderer might have switched it off before he made his get-away, or the room might have been dark all the time. I'd give

a good smoke to know whether the murder was done in the light or the dark."

Pinto's eyes widened inquiringly.

"You see, Pinto, if the light was on we can take it for granted Gage saw the murderer's face. If the room was dark, then he was just guessing when he told you it was the Phantom. It would have been a natural guess, too, for he would be very apt to suppose that the murderer was the man who had sent him the threatening letter. Since we can't know whether Gage was stabbed in the light or the dark, we'd better forget what he told you and take a fresh start." His eyes flitted about the room, and a flicker of interest appeared in their depths. "How do you suppose the murderer got out, Pinto?"

The patrolman looked significantly at the single window in the room. Culligore took a spiral tape measure from the little black box he always carried when at work on a homicide case and measured the width of the narrow sash.

"Too small," he declared. "You'd have to yank in your belt several notches before you could crawl through a window of this size, Pinto. Anyhow, it's latched from the inside."

A look of perplexity in his reddish face, Pinto turned to the door. He looked a bit dazed as he noticed the damage he had wrought in forcing it. One of the panels was cracked in the center, and the slot in which the bolt had rested had been torn out of the frame.

"You see, Pinto." There was a grin on Culligore's lips. "The murderer couldn't have got out of the window, because it's much too small, and he couldn't have walked out through the door, because it was bolted from the inside. There's no transom, so he could not have adjusted the bolt from the other

side. Nobody has yet figured out a way of passing through a door or window and leaving it bolted on the inside."

Pinto stared at the door, at the window, and finally at Culligore. The problem seemed beyond him. Then he took his baton and, tapping as he went, explored every square foot of floor and walls, but no hollow sounds betrayed the presence of a hidden opening. He shook his head in a flabbergasted way.

"It's possible, of course," suggested the lieutenant, "that the murderer was still in the room when you broke in. He might have made his get-away in the dark while you were hunting for the light-switch."

"The housekeeper would have seen him," Pinto pointed out. "She was standing just outside. And there was a crowd at the entrance. Say," and a startled look crossed his face, "do you suppose Gage killed himself?"

"That would be an easy solution, all right. But, if he did, what was his idea in telling you that the Phantom had done it? And I don't see any knife around. Gage wouldn't have had the strength to pull it out of the wound, and, even if he had, how did he dispose of it? No, Pinto, Gage was murdered, and—hang it all!—it's beginning to look as though the Phantom did it."

"But you just said——"

"All I'm saying now is that it's beginning to look as if the Phantom had had a hand in it. Things aren't always what they seem, you know. I'm not taking much stock in what Gage told you just before he died. There are other reasons. One of them is the size of that window. Another is the fact that the door was bolted on the inside. Together they

show that the man who committed this murder accomplished something of a miracle in getting out of the room. The Phantom is the only man I know who can do that sort of thing."

He grinned sheepishly, as if conscious of having said something that sounded extravagant.

"Stunts like that are the Phantom's long suit," he went on. "He likes to throw dust in the eyes of the police and keep everybody guessing. But he was always a gentlemanly rascal, and it takes something besides a bolted door and a window latched on the inside to make me believe he has gotten down to dirty work. Wish the medical examiner would hurry up."

He took a cover from the cot and threw it over the upper part of the body. A chance glance toward the door made him pause. Just across the threshold, with hands clasped across her breast and eyes fixed rigidly on the lifeless heap on the floor, stood the housekeeper. She awoke with a start from her reverie as she felt the lieutenant's steady gaze on her face, and she shrank back a step. With a puckering of the brows, Culligore turned away. His eyes fell on the safe.

A pull at the knob told him it was locked. He took a magnifying lens from his kit and carefully examined the surface. Then, with a shake of the head signifying he had found no finger prints, he crooked his index finger at the housekeeper. She advanced reluctantly, and Culligore studied her with a sidelong glance.

"You needn't talk unless you want to," he said gently. "The department isn't offering you any immunity. We've known for some time that Gage was running a fence, though we never got the goods on him."

The woman, standing in a crouching attitude and

studiously avoiding Culligore's gaze, swept a tress of moist gray hair from her forehead.

"We've also suspected that you have been in cahoots with him," continued the lieutenant in casual tones. "Oh, don't get scared. We won't go into that just now. All I want is that we understand each other."

The woman raised her head and looked straight at Officer Pinto, and there was a hint of dread in her eyes as their glances met. A puzzled frown crossed Culligore's face as he noticed the strange exchange of glances; then he pointed to the safe.

"Know how to open it?"

The housekeeper shook her head. "Mr. Gage kept only cheap junk in it, anyhow. All he used it for was a blind."

"A blind?"

"He had to keep a lot of valuables in the house all the time, and he was always afraid of burglars. He kept a lot of phony stuff in the safe, thinking if burglars found it they might be fooled and not look any further."

"Ah! Not a bad idea. Where did he keep the real stuff?"

The woman hesitated for a moment; then, with a quick gesture, she pointed to the old writing desk.

"Gage was a shrewd one," observed the lieutenant. "With a safe in the room, nobody would think of looking for valuables in a broken-down desk. Now," drawing a little closer to the woman and trying to catch her shifty eyes, "I wish you would tell us who killed him. I think you know."

A tremor passed over the woman's ashen face, and she fixed Pinto with a look that caused the lieutenant to lift his brows in perplexity. Finally, she pointed a finger at the patrolman.

"You heard what he said, didn't you? Mr. Gage told him the Gray Phantom did it. Isn't that enough?"

Culligore regarded her narrowly, as if sensing an attempt at evasion in what she had just said. Then he nodded and seemed to be searching his memory.

"Let me see—Gage and the Phantom had some kind of row a few years back?"

The housekeeper's "Yes" was scarcely audible.

"What was it about?"

Her lips curled in scorn. "That's what I could never understand. They were quarreling like two overgrown boys over a piece of green rock. Imitation jade was what Mr. Gage called it. I never got the story straight, but it seems the Phantom had been carrying it around as a kind of keepsake for years. He lost it finally, and somehow it got into Mr. Gage's hands. The Phantom wanted it back, but Mr. Gage was just stubborn enough to hang on to it. They had an awful rumpus, and I think the Phantom threatened to get Mr. Gage some day."

"All that fuss about a piece of phony jade? The Phantom must have had some particular reason for wanting it back. What was it shaped like?"

"It was a funny kind of cross, with eight tips to it."

"A Maltese cross, maybe." Lieutenant Culligore whistled softly. "The Phantom's a queer cuss. Likely as not he thought more of that piece of imitation jade than most people would of a thousand dollars. What I don't see is why Gage wouldn't give it up. Unless," he added with a shrewd grin, "he knew how badly the Phantom wanted it and hoped to make him cough up some real dough for it. Wasn't that it?"

A shrug was the housekeeper's only response.

"And the Phantom, of course, balked at the idea of paying good money for his own property. But it seems Gage would have given it up when he saw that it was putting his life in danger. I suppose, though, he thought the Phantom was only bluffing. He didn't believe anybody would commit a murder over a thing that could be bought for a few cents."

Again the housekeeper shot Pinto a queer glance. "If you don't want me any more, I think I'll——"

"Just a moment," interrupted Culligore. "I want you to show me the letter Gage got yesterday."

With a sullen gesture she stepped to the desk, fumbled for a few moments among the drawers, then drew forth a letter and handed it to the lieutenant. Culligore examined the envelope and the superscription under the light, then pulled out the enclosure.

" 'The Gray Phantom neither forgives nor forgets,' " he read aloud. "Short and to the point. Now let's have a look at the Maltese cross. But wait—here's the medical examiner. You're late, 'doc."

"Car broke down." The examiner, a thickset, bearded, crisp-mannered individual, put a few questions to Culligore and Pinto, then uncovered the body, explored the region of the wound with an expert touch, and finally jotted down a few notes in a red-covered book. As he rose from his kneeling position, the lieutenant gave him a signal out of the corner of his eye, and the two men left the room together.

"Just one question, 'doc." Culligore spoke in low tones, as if anxious that Pinto and the housekeeper should not hear. "About that wound. How long 'did Gage live after he was stabbed?"

"Not very long."

"Long enough to tell Pinto the name of the man who stabbed him?"

The examiner looked startled. "Yes, in all probability. Say, you don't suspect that cop in there of——"

"Not after what you've told me." Culligore wheeled on his heels and re-entered the inner room. His upper lip brushed the tip of his nose, signifying he had learned something interesting. Pinto was replacing the cover over the body, while the housekeeper, standing a few paces away, was regarding him with a fixed, inscrutable look.

"Now let's see the Maltese cross," directed the lieutenant.

The woman jerked herself up. Her eyes held a defiant gleam, but it died away quickly. With evident reluctance she approached the desk and pointed.

"There's a hidden drawer back there in the corner," she announced. "I don't know how to open it. You'll have to find that out for yourself."

Culligore, after looking in vain for a concealed spring, took a small tool from his kit. To locate the drawer without the woman's help would have been a difficult task, for it was ingeniously hidden in an apparently solid portion of the desk. With a few deft twists and jerks he forced it open and poured out the contents, consisting of a great number of small objects wrapped in tissue paper. Each of the little wads contained a diamond. Unwrapping one after another, Culligore gathered them in a glittering heap on the desk. The stones varied in size and brilliancy. Occasionally he raised one of them to the light and inspected it keenly, satisfying himself of its genuineness.

"Some eye-teasers!" he muttered. "But where's the Maltese cross?"

The housekeeper's face went blank. She stared at the diamonds, then at the empty drawer.

"It was there day before yesterday," she declared. "Mr. Gage showed it to me."

There was an odd tension in the lieutenant's manner. "Did the Phantom know about the secret drawer and how to open it?"

The woman, one hand clutching the edge of the desk, seemed to ponder. "I don't know. He might have. The Phantom called on Mr. Gage several times after they started quarreling. But——"

"Well, it doesn't matter." There was a strain of suppressed disappointment in Culligore's tones, and his face hinted that an illusion was slipping away from him. "It looks as though the thing was settled. The Gray Phantom is the only man I know who would pass up some fifty thousand dollars' worth of diamonds after taking the trouble to steal a gewgaw worth about two bits."

With dragging gait he left the room, stepped behind the counter outside, and spoke into the telephone. In a few moments now the alarm would go out and a thousand eyes would be searching for the Gray Phantom. Culligore, tarrying for a little after he had hung up the receiver, looked as though he were in a mood to quarrel with his duty and with the facts staring him in the face. Then he shrugged, as if to banish regrets of which he was half ashamed, and his face bore a look of dogged determination when he stepped back into the bedroom.

"We'll get him," he announced with grim assurance. "Inside fifteen minutes there'll be a net thrown around this old town so tight a mouse couldn't wriggle through."

He picked up his hat and kit, and just then his

eyes fell on the housekeeper's face. In vain he exercised his wits to interpret the sly gaze with which she was fixing Patrolman Pinto.

Did it mean fear, suspicion, horror, hate, or all four?

CHAPTER III

BLUE OR GRAY?

CUTHBERT VANARDY was conscious of a disquieting tension in the air. The long shadows cast by the trees that stood in clusters on the lawn of Sea-Glimpse impressed him as sinister harbingers of coming events. The wind had a raw edge, and it produced a dolorous melody as it went moaning over the landscape. Vanardy recognized the vague sense of depression and foreboding he experienced as he walked down the path that wound in and out among flower beds and parterres of shrubbery. He had noticed it often in the past, and always on the eve of some tragic event.

He could not understand, for of late his life had fallen into serene and humdrum lines, and there had been no hint of disturbing occurrences. His horticultural experiments had kept him well occupied, and he had derived a great deal of satisfaction from the favorable comments which the products of his gardens had created among experts at the horticultural expositions in New York and Boston, as well as from the speculations aroused concerning the identity of the anonymous exhibitor, who for private reasons preferred to remain unknown. Nothing of an exciting nature had happened in several months, and, but for his intangible misgivings, there was no sign of an interruption to his tranquil life.

On the veranda he stopped and looked back into the gathering dusk. The trees and shrubs, colored

and distorted by his restless imagination, took on weird contours and seemed to assume life and motion. No doubt, he told himself, the premonitions he had felt of late were also the products of his fancy. They could be nothing else, for he had severed all the links connecting him with the old life. Time had quieted all the dreams and impulses of his former self. He smiled as it occurred to him that his highest ambition at the present moment was to produce a gray orchid.

It was only a whim, a diversion from more serious work, but the novelty of the experiment, as well as the difficulties in the way, appealed to him. By intricate cross-breeding he was gradually developing an orchid of a dim, mystic gray, his favorite color. When once evolved, the hybrid should be known as the Phantom Orchid. It would be the living symbol of whatever had been good in his other self, the Gray Phantom.

His thoughts went back to those other days when he had gone, like a swaggering Robin Hood, from one stupendous adventure to another. Even his bitterest enemies, and there had been many of them, had never accused the Gray Phantom of being actuated by considerations of sordid gain. The public had gasped and the police muttered maledictions as he gratified his thirst for thrills and excitement, always playing the game in strict accord with his code and invariably planning his exploits so that his victims were villains of a far blacker dye than he. Always his left hand had tossed away what his right hand had plucked. Hospitals, orphan asylums and other philanthropic organizations became the recipients of donations that were never traced to their source. Princely and mysterious gifts poured into garrets and hovels in a way that caused simple-

minded people to believe in a return of the day of miracles.

The Gray Phantom, through it all, maintained an elusiveness that completely baffled the police and clothed his identity in a glamourous haze. So astounding were his performances that there were those who asked themselves whether he was not practicing black magic. Once, in the early days of his career, he fell into the clutches of the police, satisfying the superstitious ones that he was really a being of flesh and blood, but an amazing escape a few days later revived the gossip of a rogue who was in collusion with evil spirits. The Phantom was greatly amused, and spurred his energies to even more dizzying flights, but there were times when a softer mood came upon him, and then he wondered why his restless spirit could not have found a different outlet. Perhaps the reason was to be found in the remote and dimly remembered past when, friendless and homeless, he had derived his philosophy of life from thieving urchins and night-prowling gangsters.

The years passed, and the Gray Phantom's adventures made his sobriquet known from coast to coast, but gradually the life he was leading began to pall on him. His exploits no longer gave him the thrills he craved, and he began to search, at first blindly and haltingly, for a more satisfying way of unleashing his boundless energies. There came long lapses between his adventures, and finally it began to be rumored that the Gray Phantom had gone into retirement with his accumulated treasures, for no one guessed that he had flung away his spoils as fast as he garnered them in. Nobody understood the true reason for the change that had come over him, and the Phantom least of all.

He often wondered at the obscure impulses that had impelled him to seek seclusion at Sea-Glimpse, a narrow stretch of wooded land surrounded on three sides by jagged coast line and in the rear by forest and farm land. He could not understand them, except that his new mode of life gave him a sense of pleasing remoteness from things he wished to forget, and at times he thought he would be content to spend the rest of his days in this secluded nook, secure from intrusion and free to devote himself to his hobby and his books.

But to-night a vague unrest was upon him. He peered into the shadows, constantly growing longer and darker, and it seemed as if the ghostly figures of his past were reaching out for him. Perhaps, there was still a forgotten link or two that bound him to the old life. He shrugged, as if to banish disquieting thoughts, and entered the house. Stepping into the library, he lighted his reading lamp and took a work on horticulture from the shelf. There was a problem in connection with the gray orchid that he had not yet been able to work out satisfactorily. He sat down and opened the book, but the print danced and blurred beneath his eyes. A woman's face appeared out of nowhere, the same face that had haunted him in idle moments for months. His mental picture was dim and fragmentary, and he could not distinctly remember even the color of the hair or whether the eyes were blue or gray, but the vision pursued him with the persistence of a haunting scent or a strain from an old familiar song.

Helen Hardwick and he had shared several adventures and perils together. Only a few months had elapsed since he rescued her from the clutches of the mysterious "Mr. Shei," the leader of an arch-

conspiracy which the Phantom had frustrated. About a year before that he had emerged from his retreat for long enough to restore to her father, curator of the Cosmopolitan Museum, a collection of Assyrian antiques that Hardwick had spent the best years of his life in gathering, and which had been stolen by a criminal organization headed by the Phantom's old-time enemy and rival, "The Duke." To Vanardy the achievement had meant little more than a pleasing diversion and an opportunity to humiliate a man whose personality and methods he abhorred, and Helen Hardwick's gratitude had made him feel that she was giving him the accolade of an undeserved knightship. She had come to Sea-Glimpse to thank him, and her parting glance and smile were still vivid in his recollection. He often glanced dreamily at the spot where she had stood when for an instant her hand lingered within his. With the blood pounding against his temples, he had exerted all his power of will to restrain himself from calling her back. There were times when he regretted having let her go like that, without hope of seeing her again, but in his soberer moments he saw the inevitableness of the outcome. In the eyes of the world he was still an outlaw, and too great a gulf separated the Gray Phantom and Helen Hardwick. The memory of her eyes, warm, frank and bright, would be with him always. He had her to thank for the finest emotions he had ever experienced, and he would try to be content with that.

She seemed little more than a dream to him now, and even the dream was fragmentary. Again he thought it strange that he could not remember the color of her eyes or hair, and that little remained with him save a misty and tantalizing vision of loveliness.

He closed the book and passed to the window. The moon had risen, bathing the narrow strip of water visible between the birches and hemlocks in a white mist. The house, which Vanardy had restored from the dilapidated condition in which he had found it, was silent save for an occasional creaking of old timbers. Clifford Wade, once his chief lieutenant and now the major-domo of his little household, had gone to the village for the mail. The Phantom stood lost in reflections, his deep gray eyes soft and luminous. On occasion they could sting and stab like points of steel, but in repose they were the eyes of a dreamer. The nostrils were full and sensitive, and the arch of the lips was partly obscured by a short-cropped beard that would have made him hard to recognize from his photograph in a revolving case at police headquarters.

He turned as a knock sounded on the door. A fat man stepped through the door, groaning and puffing as if the task of carrying his huge body through life were the bane of his existence. Wade, the ostensible owner of Sea-Glimpse—for its real master was seldom seen beyond the boundaries of the estate—placed a bundle of mail on the table, gave his master a long-suffering look, and withdrew.

With a listless air Vanardy glanced at the mail and began to unfold the newspapers. He ran his eyes over the headlines, and a caption, blacker and larger than the rest, caught his languid attention. He stared at it for moments, as if his brain were unable to absorb its meaning. Slowly and dazedly he mumbled the words:

DYING MAN ACCUSES THE GRAY PHANTOM

Presently his quickening eye was running down the

column of type. It was a lurid and highly colored account of the murder of Sylvanus Gage, a crime said by the police to be one of the strangest on record. Headquarters detectives confessed themselves baffled by several of the circumstances, and especially by the fact that the murderer seemed to have accomplished the apparently impossible feat of making his escape through a door which had been found bolted on the inside when the police reached the scene.

The murder, it was stated, would probably have gone down in the annals of crime as an unsolved mystery but for the fact that the dying man had whispered the name of his assailant to Patrolman Pinto, who had been summoned to the scene by the housekeeper, Mrs. Mary Trippe, after the latter had been disturbed by a mysterious sound. The name mentioned by the victim was that of Cuthbert Vanardy, known internationally as the Gray Phantom and regarded by the police as one of the most ingenious criminals of modern times.

However, the account went on, the Gray Phantom's guilt would have been clearly established even without his victim's dying statement. It had been learned that for some years a feud had existed between the two men and that the Gray Phantom had threatened to take his enemy's life. The total absence of finger prints and other tangible clews strongly suggested that the deed could have been perpetrated only by a criminal in the Phantom's class. The perplexing features added further proof of the Phantom's guilt. Who else could have made his escape in such an inexplicable manner? Who but the Gray Phantom, who was known to be pursuing a criminal career for pleasure and excitement rather than for the profits he derived from it, would have

left behind him a small fortune in perfect stones, taking nothing but a worthless curio?

These and other details Vanardy read with interest. He smiled as he reached the concluding paragraph, stating that a countrywide search for the murderer was in progress and that the police confidently expected to make an arrest within twenty-four hours. He glanced at the accompanying likeness of himself, made from a photograph taken in the early stages of his career.

"What drivel!" he exclaimed, tossing the paper aside. Then, one by one, he glanced through the other early editions of the New York evening newspapers. All featured the Gage murder on the first page, and all the accounts agreed in regard to essential details. In *The Evening Sphere's* story of the crime, however, he detected a subtle difference. It presented the same array of damning facts, pointing straight to the inevitable conclusion of the Phantom's guilt, yet, between the lines, he sensed an elusive quality that differentiated it from the others. He read it again, more slowly this time; and here and there, in an oddly twisted sentence or an ambiguous phrase, he caught a hint that the writer of the *Sphere's* article entertained a secret doubt of the Phantom's guilt.

The suggestion was so feeble, however, that a casual reader would scarcely have noticed it, and whatever doubts the writer may have felt were smothered under a mass of evidence pointing in the opposite direction. He threw the paper down with an air of disdain. Here, in this sheltered retreat, what the world thought of him was of no account. Serene in his seclusion, he could snap his fingers at its opinions and suspicions. He sat down at the

piano, and a moment later his finely tapering fingers were flashing over the keys.

Suddenly, in the midst of one of his favorite arias, his hands began to falter. For a time he sat motionless, with lips tightening, gazing narrowly at the point where Helen Hardwick had stood at the moment when he held her hand. His face was grim and troubled, as if a disturbing thought had just occurred to him. He got up and with long strides passed to the desk, where he pressed a button.

"Wade," he crisply announced when the fat man reappeared, "I am going to New York in the morning."

Wade sat down, drawing a squeaky protest from an unoffending chair. "To New—New York?" he stammered.

"Exactly. Tell Dullah to pack my grip. I shall leave early, about the time you are getting your beauty sleep."

Wade blinked his little eyes. "But why, boss?"

"Here's the reason." Vanardy handed him one of the papers he had been perusing, watching with an amused smile the flabbergasted look that came into the fat man's face as he read. As he approached the end of the article, wheezy gasps and indignant mutters punctuated the reading.

"Rot!" he commented emphatically. "If I wasn't a fat man I'd lick the editor of this sheet within an inch of his life. Why, you always played the game according to the code, boss. You never killed a man in all your life."

"No, never."

"And you were right here at Sea-Glimpse at the time the murder was done."

"True enough. But I might have some difficulty proving it. Your own testimony wouldn't be par-

ticularly impressive. Besides, there's just enough of truth in the police theory to give color to the lies. It is true Gage and I quarreled, and I believe I once threatened to give the old skinflint a beating. It was a foolish wrangle, involving nothing but a cross made of imitation jade. I'd been wearing it attached to a chain around my neck as far back as I could remember. Who put it there I don't know. Perhaps——"

"Your mother—maybe," suggested Wade, slanting a searching gaze at Vanardy.

"I don't know, Wade. You may be right. I remember neither father nor mother. All I know is that the cross seemed to be the only connecting link between my present and the past I couldn't remember. I fought like mad when the street urchins and gangsters tried to take it away from me, and somehow, through thick and thin, I managed to cling to it. Then, one day about six years ago, I lost it. Probably the chain parted. Anyhow, in some mysterious manner the cross fell into Gage's possession. I went to Gage and demanded it. He must have seen how anxious I was to recover it, for he put a stiff price on it. I was willing to pay—would have paid almost anything—but each time I began to count out the money Gage doubled his price. So it went on for years, and I admit I sometimes felt like strangling the old miser. But I never threatened to kill him and I never wrote the letter mentioned in the papers."

"Somebody's been doing some tall lying," declared Wade irately. "If I wasn't so fat I'd make the fellow that wrote this article eat his own words. But you should worry, boss. They can't get away with it."

"I am not so sure, Wade. Seems to me they've

made out a fairly complete case against the Gray Phantom. The motive is substantial enough. There are enough mysterious circumstances to suggest that only the Phantom could have committed the crime. The fact that the murderer stole a cheap trinket and left fifty thousand dollars' worth of real diamonds behind him is rather impressive. And you mustn't forget that a little evidence against the Gray Phantom will go a long way with a jury."

Wade, a picture of ponderous wrath, crumpled the newspaper in his huge fist. The fretful look in the small round eyes signified that his mind was grappling with a problem.

"The letter Gage got the day before the murder must have been forged," he ventured at last.

"Of course; but it may have been done skillfully enough to deceive all but the keenest eye. Handwriting experts have been known to disagree in matters of that kind."

The fat man reflected heavily. "Why didn't Gage beat it for the tall woods when he got the letter?"

"Because the tall woods are full of ambushes. Likely as not the letter gave him a jolt at first. Then, upon giving it a sober second thought, he cooled down. His principal consideration was that the Gray Phantom had never been known to commit a murder, and that consequently the letter was either a joke or a bluff."

"But he told the cop it was the Gray Phantom that stabbed him."

"Naturally. A wound in the chest isn't conducive to clear thinking. We may assume that the murderer approached his victim by stealth and that Gage never saw the man who struck him down. Under the circumstances it was natural enough for him to

suppose that, after all, the Gray Phantom had carried out his threat. What else was he to think?"

An ominous rumble sounded in Wade's expansive chest. You've been framed, boss."

Vanardy nodded. "And it doesn't require a great deal of brilliance to figure out who engineered the frame-up. The Duke has the reputation of being a good hater."

The fat man seemed startled. "But the Duke's in stir," he argued. "You sent him there yourself."

"So I did." A pleased smile lighted Vanardy's features. "But two or three members of his gang were not present at the round-up, and I have received tips to the effect that they have been organizing a new crowd. I suppose the Duke has been communicating with them through underground channels and instructing them in regard to this frame-up. The Duke has sworn to get me, and undoubtedly this is his method of accomplishing his aim. He chose the mode of revenge which he thought would hurt me most."

"If I wasn't a fat man I would—" began Wade.

"Save your threats. The Duke is a crafty rascal, just as clever as he's vindictive. That kind of a man makes a bad enemy. The only way to queer his game is to track down the man who did the crime. That's why I am going to New York in the morning. The police will never find the culprit, for they are wasting their time and energies looking for the Gray Phantom. Therefore it's up to me."

A scowl deepened in Wade's rubicund face. "The world must be coming to an end when the Gray Phantom turns detective. It's the maddest, craziest thing you ever did yet, boss."

"It will be quite an adventure." Vanardy's eyes twinkled.

"It's too risky, boss. Why, every dick and harness bull and amateur sleuth on the American continent is on the lookout for you."

"Very likely."

"The police have enough on you to send you to the jug for a million years, even without the Sylvanus Gage job. And you can just bet the Duke's gang will have their eyes peeled, watching their chance to lead you into a trap."

"I suppose so."

The fat man sighed. He knew from long experience that his chief, once his mind was made up, was impervious to pleas and arguments.

"Why don't you just sit tight?" was his final attempt. "I don't see what you're worrying about. They'll never find you here. Nobody knows where to look for you. You're safe."

"Sure of that?" Vanardy smiled queerly. "There's one person who knows where to find me."

A look of startled comprehension came into Wade's face. "You mean the little queen who was so heart-broken because the Duke had stolen a lot of old Assyrian junk from her dad?"

"I mean Miss Helen Hardwick," declared Vanardy stiffly. "I was fortunate in being able to recover the collection from the Duke and restore it to Mr. Hardwick."

"She was sure easy on the eyes!" rhapsodized Wade, unrebuked. "But you let her slip away from you, after you'd stirred up most of the earth to dry her tears. I never got you on that deal boss. Why, if I hadn't been a fat man—" He sighed and rolled wistful eyes at the ceiling.

Vanardy scowled, then laughed.

"Chuck the sentiment, you old clod-hopping hippo. As far as I know, Miss Hardwick is the only living

person, outside our own circle, who is aware of my whereabouts."

"Will she give you away?"

"It depends," murmured Vanardy. "If she believes me guilty of murder she may consider it her duty to inform the police, and she would be absolutely right in doing so. But that's neither here nor there. I'm starting for New York in a few hours to track down the murderer of Sylvanus Gage."

Admiration clashed with anxiety in Wade's face. "I get you, boss. You want to keep the Gray Phantom's record clean. You don't want any bloodstains on his name. You don't want the world to think that you've committed a murder."

An odd smile played about the Phantom's lips. "Wrong, Wade. It goes against the grain to have a foul murder linked to one's name, but it isn't that. I'm not lying awake nights worrying about the world's opinion. The only thing that troubles me is——" He broke off, and his eyes sought the spot where Helen Hardwick had stood.

"You needn't say it, boss." Wade's voice was a trifle thick as he struggled out of the chair and gripped the other's hand. "If I wasn't a fat man I'd tag right along, but I guess I'd only be in the way. Good luck—and give my regards to the little wren."

With slow, trundling strides he left the room. A moment later the door had closed behind him, and the Gray Phantom was alone. Once more, as he paced the floor, his eyes were soft and luminous. Suddenly he paused and bent a reverential look on the rug at his feet, as if he were standing in a hallowed spot.

"Blue or gray?" he mumbled.

CHAPTER IV

MR. ADAIR, OF BOSTON

"ROLAND ADAIR, Boston, Massachusetts." It was thus the Gray Phantom inscribed the register at Hotel Pyramidion, while an affable clerk beamed approval on his athletic and well-groomed figure.

"What do you require, Mr. Adair?"

"Parlor, bedroom, and bath, with southern exposure, preferably above the sixth floor."

The clerk, intuitively sensing that the new arrival was one accustomed to having his wishes complied with, glanced at his card index. "We have exactly what you want, Mr. Adair."

"Good! I wish breakfast and the morning newspapers sent to my apartment at once."

"It shall be done, Mr. Adair." The clerk bowed debonairly, little suspecting that the new guest, who so unmistakably presented all the earmarks of a cultured and leisurely gentleman, was at this moment the most "wanted" man on the North American continent. The guest himself grinned in his short black beard while an elevator carried him to the ninth floor, and an acute observer would have gained the impression that he was bent upon an adventure hugely to his liking.

He ate his breakfast slowly and with keen relish, meanwhile glancing over the newspapers, which were still featuring the East Houston Street murder as

the chief sensation. Nothing had as yet been discovered which threw the faintest light on the peculiar manner in which the slayer had left the scene of his crime, and it was regarded as doubtful whether this mysterious phase of the case would be cleared up until after the Gray Phantom's arrest. It had been ascertained that the notorious criminal was not aboard any of the vessels that had sailed for foreign ports since the murder, so it was thought probable that the fugitive was still in the country, and it was confidently declared by police officials that the drag-net would gather him in before long.

The accounts in the various papers were substantially similar, but again the Phantom detected a faintly dissenting note in the *Sphere's* article. It was so slight as to be scarcely discernible, but to the Phantom it signified a lurking doubt in the writer's mind, and a suggestion that the *Sphere's* reporter sensed a weak link in the chain of evidence.

"I'll have a talk with the fellow," he decided. "I might ask him to take dinner with me this evening. He may prove interesting."

He finished his coffee and lighted a long, thin cigar, then passed to the window and watched the procession below. After his long and monotonous seclusion at Sea-Glimpse the life of the city acted as a gentle electric stimulant on his nerves. He glowed and tingled with sensations that had lain dormant during long months of tedium, and the strongest and raciest of these was a feeling of ever present danger.

The Gray Phantom did not deceive himself. His present adventure was by far the most hazardous of his career. On the one hand he was threatened by the nimble-witted man hunters of the police department, and on the other by the henchmen of the Duke.

His only hope of safety lay in his subtler intelligence, which had seldom failed him in moments of danger, and the temporary protection afforded by his beard.

Luckily, the only photograph of him in existence, the one the newspapers had displayed on their front pages the morning after the murder, showed him smooth-shaven. The beard, giving him a maturer and somewhat more professional appearance, afforded a thin and yet fairly satisfactory disguise, but it would be of scant use if by the slightest misstep or careless move he should attract suspicion to himself. In such an event, certain records filed away in the archives of the police would quickly establish his identity as the Gray Phantom. Nevertheless, he was pleased that the descriptions carried by the newspapers had made no mention of a beard.

There was a measure of safety, too, in the sheer audacity with which he was proceeding. The man hunters might look everywhere else, but they would scarcely expect to find their quarry living sumptuously at a first-class hotel. His free and easy mode of conduct, unmarked by the slightest effort at concealment, afforded a protection which he could not have found in the shabbiest hovel and under the most elaborate disguise.

Yet, despite all the safeguards his brain could invent, the situation was perilous enough to give the Gray Phantom all the excitement his nature craved. His pulses throbbed, and there was a keen sparkle in his eyes as he left the hotel and went out on the streets. The very air seemed charged with a quality that held him in a state of piquant suspense. The policemen appeared more alert than usual, and now and then snatches of conversation reached his ears from little groups at street corners and in doorways who were avidly discussing the Gage murder and the

chances of the Gray Phantom being caught. At each subway entrance and elevated stairway loitered a seemingly slothful and impassive character whom his trained eye easily identified as a detective.

Chuckling softly in his beard, the Phantom walked on. No one seemed to suspect that the striking and faultlessly garbed figure that sauntered down the streets with such a carefree and easy stride, looking for all the world like a leisurely gentleman out for his morning constitutional, might be the object of one of the most thorough and far-reaching man hunts ever undertaken by the police. Occasionally he paused to inspect a window display, incidentally listening to a discussion in which his name was frequently mentioned. The East Houston Street murder, which under ordinary circumstances would have attracted but passing notice, had become a tremendous sensation because of the Gray Phantom's supposed connection with it.

Gradually he veered off the crowded thoroughfares and entered into a maze of crooked, narrow, and squalid streets where housewives and children with dirt-streaked faces viewed his imposing figure with frank curiosity. After a glance at a corner sign he turned east, quickening his pace a little and scanning the numbers over the doorways as he proceeded. One of the buildings, a murky brick front with a funeral wreath hanging on the door and a tobacconist's sign lettered across the ground-floor window, he regarded with more than casual interest.

"Sylvanus Gage, Dealer in Pipes, Tobacco, and Cigars," he read in passing; then, after a moment's hesitation, he pursued his eastward course, a thoughtful pucker between his eyes. He was trying to outline a course of procedure, a matter to which hitherto he had given scant attention, for the Phan-

tom was the veriest tyro in the science of criminal investigation. It occurred to him that one of his first steps should be an inspection of the scene of the murder.

A few blocks farther east he turned into a once famous restaurant and ordered luncheon. He dallied over the dishes, smoked a cigar while he drank his coffee, and it was after three o'clock when he left the place and headed in the direction of the tobacco store. This time he paused in front of the establishment, looked through the window, and finding the interior deserted, resolutely rang the bell. Some time passed before the side door was opened by a flat-chested woman with sharp features and unkempt gray hair.

"What do you want?" she demanded sulkily, regarding the caller with oddly piercing eyes. "Can't you see the store's closed?"

The Phantom lifted his hat and smiled urbanely. "Sorry to intrude," he murmured. "You are Mrs. Trippe, I believe?"

"Well, suppose I am?"

"The late Mr. Gage's housekeeper?"

"What's that to you?"

"I am Mr. Adair, of Boston," explained the Phantom, unruffled by her churlish demeanor. He and the woman had met once or twice during his stormy interviews with Gage, but he felt sure she did not recognize him. "You may have heard of me as an amateur investigator of crime," he went on easily. "I have established a modest reputation in that line. This morning I happened to read an account of Mr. Gage's tragic death, and some of the circumstances impressed me as interesting. Could I trouble you to show me the room in which the crime was committed?"

His hand was in the act of extracting a bank note from his pocket, but he checked it in time, a sixth sense warning him that Mrs. Trippe might resent an attempt to grease her palm.

"I don't see what you want to pester me for," she muttered sullenly, fixing him with a look of obvious suspicion. "The police have almost worried the life out of me with their fool questions and carryings-on. The case is settled and there's nothing more to investigate."

"Sure of that, Mrs. Trippe?" He had detected a faint hesitancy in her speech and manner, and he was quick to take advantage of it. Incidentally he noticed that she had aged a great deal since he last saw her, and he doubted whether he should have recognized her if they had met by chance. "What about the murder's manner of escape?" he added. "I understand that hasn't been explained yet."

"Well, he escaped, didn't he? I don't see that it makes any difference *how* he did it. The Gray Phantom always did things his own way. But," after a few moments' wavering, "you can come in and look around."

Her abrupt acquiescence surprised him, and he guessed it was not wholly due to a desire to be obliging. He wondered, as he followed her through the store, whether her decision to admit him was not prompted by a wish to see what deductions he would make after inspecting the scene of the crime.

She opened the inner door, remarking that the damage wrought by Officer Pinto had been repaired a few hours after the murder and that the police department's seal had been removed only a short while ago. The Phantom passed into the narrow chamber, only slightly altered in appearance since the time of his last visit. The realization that he was

viewing the scene of a crime supposed to have been perpetrated by himself appealed strongly to his dramatic instinct, and the thought that at this moment the police were searching for him with a fine-toothed comb lent a touch of humor to the situation.

The woman stepped to the small window in the rear and raised the shade, then stationed herself at the door, peering at him out of wary, narrow-lidded eyes, as if intent on his slightest move. The Phantom glanced at the rickety desk at which Gage had sat while haggling over petty sums and figuring percentages to the fraction of a cent.

"I see one of the drawers has been forced open," he remarked.

"Lieutenant Culligore did that," explained the woman. "That was the drawer where Mr. Gage kept most of his valuables."

"Including the Maltese cross," the Phantom smilingly put in.

Mrs. Trippe nodded. "There's a spring somewhere that opens and shuts it, but none of us could find it, and so Lieutenant Culligore had to break the drawer open."

"Yet the cross was gone," observed the Phantom, "and the drawer was intact when Lieutenant Culligore found it. That would seem to indicate that the murderer knew how to operate the spring."

"Well, hasn't the Phantom proved that he knows just about all there is to know?"

"I am sure the Phantom would feel highly complimented if he could hear you say that." He smiled discreetly, realizing that here was another item of proof, for he was willing to wager that, though he had never seen Gage work the spring, he could have opened the drawer without laying violent hands upon it. He turned to the window, carefully

examined the catch, then raised the lower half and endeavored to thrust his shoulders through the opening. The attempt satisfied him that even a smaller man than himself would have found it impossible to squeeze through.

That left only the door as a means of egress and ingress, and the door had been bolted on the inside when Officer Pinto arrived, which circumstance seemed to render it flatly impossible for the murderer to have escaped that way. He tried the lock and examined the stout bolt, then stepped through to the other side, closing the door behind him. A wrinkle of perplexity appeared above his eyes. Even the Phantom's nimble wits could not devise a way of passing through the door and leaving it bolted on the inside. The feat did not seem feasible, and yet the murderer must have accomplished it. His face wore a frown as he reëntered the little chamber.

"Can't figger it out, eh?" The housekeeper seemed to have read his mind. "Well, you needn't try. The police did, and they had to give it up as a bad job. The Phantom has a cute little way with him, doing things so they can't be explained."

"And yet," facing her squarely, "you don't think the Phantom committed the murder?"

A scarcely perceptible shiver ran through her shrunken figure. "What else can I think?" she parried.

He shrugged his shoulders. The impression haunted him that she was not so sure of the Phantom's guilt as she appeared. He ran his eyes over the floor, the walls, and the murky ceiling.

"And you needn't try to find any hidden openings, either," she told him, again reading his unspoken thoughts. "A bunch of headquarters detectives spent half a day tapping the walls and the ceiling

and ripping up boards in the floor. The Phantom——"

The jangle of the bell at the outer door interrupted her, and she looked scowlingly toward the front of the store. "I guess that's Officer Pinto," she muttered. "He's on night duty, but he's been prowling around here most of the time since the murder, asking silly questions when he ought to be in bed."

A hard, wary glitter appeared in the Phantom's eyes as she left the room. In an instant he had scented danger.

CHAPTER V

DANGER

COOLLY, though every nerve and muscle in his body were on the alert, the Phantom took a case from his pocket and lighted a cigarette. He stood face to face with a peril of a tangible and definite kind. The protecting beard was dependable only so long as he did not attract the attention of the police and invite a closer scrutiny. It would not for long deceive an officer whose training had made him habitually suspicious of appearances and who had been drilled in the art of seeing through disguises.

Voices came from the outer room, Mrs. Trippe's surly tones clashing with the gruff accents of Officer Pinto. The Phantom felt a tingle of suspense. It was the kind of situation he would have thoroughly enjoyed but for the fact that in this instance he could not jeopardize his liberty without also endangering his purpose.

Footsteps approached, and presently a stocky figure, with the housekeeper hovering behind, stood framed in the doorway. The Phantom, smiling serenely, felt instant relief the moment he glanced at the heavy and somewhat reddish features, with the unimpressive jaw and the stolid look in the eyes. Pinto might be a faithful plodder and a dangerous adversary in a physical encounter, but it was plain that he possessed only ordinary intelligence.

"Well, who're *you?*" bluntly demanded the officer.

It was the housekeeper who answered. "He says he is Mr. —— What did you say your name was?"

"Mr. Adair, of Boston," replied the Phantom with an air of superb tranquillity, adding the explanation he had already invented for Mrs. Trippe's benefit. "Hope I'm not intruding," he concluded.

Pinto stepped inside, his eyes fixed on the Phantom's face in a hard stare. Then, by slow degrees, the churlish expression left his features and a slightly contemptuous grin took its place.

"You're welcome," he declared. "Go as far as you like. I s'pose you're trying to dope out how the Phantom got out of the room. Well, believe me, you'll have to do some tall thinking."

The Phantom chuckled affably. Evidently Pinto had classified him as one of the harmless cranks who flock in the wake of the police whenever a mysterious crime has taken place.

"I was just discussing the problem with Mrs. Trippe," he announced easily. "It's a fascinating riddle. I infer it has gripped you, too, since you come here in civilian clothes while not on duty."

"Well, I've been kidding myself along, thinking maybe I would find the solution." Pinto's face bore a sheepish look. "There's got to be a solution somewhere, you know, and——"

"And it would be a feather in your cap if you were the one who found it first," put in the Phantom genially. "Perhaps it would mean promotion, too —who knows? But has it occurred to you that the murderer's exit is no more mysterious than his entrance? If he accomplished a miracle getting out, he also accomplished a miracle getting in."

"The Phantom's strong for the miracle stuff, all

right. But it's possible Gage himself let the murderer in. Maybe he expected somebody to call. Anyhow, we know the villain got in somehow. What I'd like to know is how he got out."

The Phantom's eyes had been on the floor, near the point where, according to the newspaper articles he had read, Gage's body must have been found. Of a sudden he looked up, and the gaze he surprised in Pinto's slyly peering eyes sent a tingle of apprehension through his body. He wondered whether the patrolman was as obtuse as he seemed.

"I understand," he said without a tremor in his voice, "that you found the room dark upon breaking in. Couldn't the murderer have slipped out while you were looking for the light switch?"

"Huh!" The contemptuous snort came from Mrs. Trippe, who, with arms crossed over her chest, stood in the rear of the room. "How could he, I'd like to know, with me standing right outside the door and a crowd of rubbernecks at the main entrance?"

The Phantom seemed to ponder. The theory he had just suggested did not seem at all plausible, and his only purpose in mentioning it had been to turn Pinto's thoughts in a new direction.

"I'd swear the rascal wasn't in the room when I broke in," declared the patrolman with emphasis.

"And he couldn't have got out before," remarked the Phantom, with a grin. At the same moment he felt Mrs. Trippe's eyes on his face. She was gazing at him as if his last remark had made a profound impression upon her. He sensed a new and baffling quality in the situation, something that just eluded his mental grasp, and he began to wonder whether the housekeeper did not know or suspect something which she had not yet told.

"The Phantom's a devil," observed Pinto, again slanting a queer glance at the other man. "Nobody of flesh and bone could pull off a stunt like this. Maybe some day he'll tell us how he did it. He'll be roped in before long. Say," with a forced laugh, "wouldn't it be funny if he should get caught right here, in this room? They say a murderer always comes back to the scene of his crime."

All the Phantom's self-control was required to repress a start. Pinto's remark, though uttered in bantering tones, was entirely too pointed to have been casual, and the gleam in his eyes testified that his suspicions were aroused.

"I think the Phantom's talents have been grossly overestimated. When he is caught we shall probably find that he is quite an ordinary mortal. Don't you think so, Mrs. Trippe?"

The woman started, then mumbled something unintelligible under her breath.

"Well, maybe," said Pinto. "I've got a feeling in my elbow that says he'll be caught before night, and then we'll see. He may be an ordinary mortal, but I'll be mighty interested to know how he got out of this room. Got any ideas on the subject, Mr. Adair?"

The Phantom's frown masked the swift working of his mind. "Yes, but you will laugh when I tell you what they are. My frank opinion is that the Phantom had nothing whatever to do with this murder."

Mrs. Trippe stared at the Phantom as if expecting an astounding revelation to fall from his lips.

Patrolman Pinto, too, seemed taken aback. A little of the color fled from his face, and for an instant his eyes held an uneasy gleam. In a moment, however, he had steadied himself, and a raucous

chuckle voiced his opinion of the Phantom's last statement.

"Say, you amateur dicks make me laugh. The Phantom had nothing to do with it, eh? Well, if he didn't commit this murder, maybe you'll tell us who did."

The Phantom, quiveringly alert, strolled across the floor and back again. There was a bland smile on his lips and the amused twinkle in his eyes concealed the tension under which his mind was laboring.

"That's asking a lot of an amateur detective, isn't it?" he suavely inquired. "Maybe it will help you, however, to know how the situation looks to a layman. You say you are willing to swear that the murderer was not in the room when you broke in. It is almost equally certain, viewing the matter in the natural order of things, that he could not have left the room between the commission of the crime and your forcible entrance. Therefore——"

He broke off, feeling a violent rush of blood to the head. He had been talking against time, hoping to find a way of diverting Pinto's suspicions from himself. Suddenly it struck him that his rambling discourse had led him straight to the solution of the mystery. The revelation flashed through his mind like a swift, blinding glare. To hide his agitation he lighted a cigarette. Through the spinning rings of smoke he saw the housekeeper's ashen face, mouth gaping and eyes staring with fierce intensity.

"Well?" prompted Pinto. His voice was a trifle shaky.

The Phantom was himself again. "Well, as I was about to say, if the murderer was not in the room when you broke in, then the circumstances point

straight to you, Mr. Pinto, as the murderer of Sylvanus Gage."

For a time the room was utterly still. The policeman seemed torn between astonishment and a nervous fear. The housekeeper held her breath, her features twisted into a smile that rendered her expression ghastly.

"I knew it!" she cried. "I knew it all the time!"

"You must be crazy," muttered Pinto, at last finding his voice.

"Not at all. But for the fact that you are an officer in good standing, you would have been suspected immediately. In the light of all the circumstances, it stands to reason that the man who broke through the door was the man who murdered Gage. No one else could have done it. Mrs. Trippe, do you remember how long Pinto was alone in the room after forcing his way in?"

The housekeeper seemed to search her memory. "It took him several moments to find the electric-light switch," she mumbled haltingly. "After that—well, he was in there for some time before he came out. Maybe two minutes, maybe five—I can't be sure."

"At any rate, long enough to drive a knife into Gage's chest." There was an exultant throb in the Phantom's tones, the eagerness of the hunter who is tracking down his quarry. "Gage, we may assume, was awakened by the noise when the door crashed in, and sprang from his bed. You probably grappled in the dark. Then——"

Pinto interrupted with a harsh, strident laugh. "Some cock-and-bull story you're handing us! If I killed Gage, then Mrs. Trippe here must have been in on the job. It was she who called me and told me to force the door."

The Phantom waved his hand airily. "Because she had heard a mysterious noise. That noise may have been prearranged to give you a chance to knife Gage. I don't pretend to understand all the minor details yet, but the essentials are clear as day. You must have committed the murder, for the simple reason that nobody else could have done it."

"Yeh?" There was a vicious sneer in Pinto's face. "Maybe you'll tell me, then, why Gage thought the Phantom was the one who knifed him."

"Because of the forged letter he had received the day before. Besides, Pinto, we don't know that Gage thought anything of the kind. We have nothing but your word for it. You were the only witness to the declaration you say Gage made. A man who will commit a cowardly murder is also capable of telling a lie."

Great bluish veins stood out on Pinto's forehead. "You're doing fine for an amateur dick," he jeered. "All you've got to do now is to figger out a motive, and the case will be complete."

"Motive? Ah, yes! The Duke has a habit of recruiting his men in queer places. Once he had an assistant district attorney on his staff; at another time an associate professor of philosophy with a penchant for forbidden things. Why shouldn't he have a hard-working patrolman?"

Pinto's figure squirmed beneath his gaze.

"Such a man would prove useful to the Duke, especially if he wanted to frame an enemy," pursued the Phantom. "Nobody suspects a policeman. A man in uniform is beyond reproach. Even if the circumstances of a crime point straight to him as the perpetrator, it is always easier to suspect somebody else, particularly someone who has a criminal record. I guess you banked on that, Pinto."

His tones bespoke a free and easy confidence, but he felt none of it. He believed that the murderer of Sylvanus Gage stood before him, but his only reason for thinking so was that, so far as appearances went, no one else could have committed the crime. He was poignantly aware that his theory would be laughed at and derided, and that he himself would be subjected to the hollow farce of a trial which must inevitably result in his conviction. Once in the clutches of the police, his chances of clearing himself would be extremely slender. "Well, Pinto, what about it?" His tones were clear and faintly taunting, giving no hint of the swift play of his wits. "Did you take the precaution of arranging an alibi?"

"No, I didn't." The policeman spoke defiantly. For an instant he fumbled about his pockets, as if searching for something. Evidently the object he wanted was not to be found about his civilian garb. "I didn't have to fix up an alibi. Say, Mr. Adair——"

He paused for a moment and came a step closer to the Phantom.

"Say," he went on, "while you're telling us so much, maybe you'll tell us how long the Gray Phantom has been wearing a beard."

Momentarily startled by the verbal thrust, the Phantom was unprepared for the physical attack that instantly followed. He felt the sudden impact of the policeman's ponderous body, precipitating him against the farther wall of the chamber. In a moment, with unexpected agility, the officer had seized Mrs. Trippe by the arm and hurried her from the room.

Then a door slammed and a key turned gratingly in the lock. The Gray Phantom was alone, a prisoner.

CHAPTER VI

THE WAY OUT

DUSK was falling, and the little room was almost dark. The sudden attack, all the more surprising because of Pinto's previous air of stolidity, had left the Phantom a trifle dazed, but in a twinkling he realized the full seriousness of his dilemma. The door had no sooner slammed than he was on his feet, regaining his breath and flexing his muscles for action.

With a spring agile as a panther's he threw himself against the door. Once it had succumbed to the superior weight of Patrolman Pinto's body, but the Phantom's leaner and nimbler figure was no match for its solid resistance. After thrice hurling himself against the obstruction, he saw that he was only wasting time and strength.

Hurriedly he switched on the light. From his pocket he took a box containing an assortment of small tools which on several occasions had stood him in good stead. In vain he tried to manipulate the lock, finding that it was too solidly imbedded in the wood. Next he tried the hinges, but the flaps were fastened on the other side of the door and therefore inaccessible. He cudgeled his wits, but to no avail; evidently the door was an impassable barrier. It seemed by far the most substantial part of the room, suggesting that Gage might have had it specially constructed as a protection against burglars.

He sprang to the window, then recalled that he had already ascertained that it was too narrow to permit him to crawl through. Another precaution of the wily Sylvanus Gage, he grimly reflected. His eyes, quick and crafty, darted over floor, ceiling, and walls, but nowhere could he see a sign of a movable panel or a hidden passage, and he remembered Mrs. Trippe's statement that headquarters detectives had spent half a day searching for a secret exit. Though he worked his wits at furious speed, the situation baffled his ingenuity.

The Phantom perceived he was trapped. The amazing luck that had attended him in the past had made him reckless and indiscreet, and now it seemed to have deserted him like a fickle charmer. He supposed that Pinto, too shrewd to attempt to deal single-handed with such a slippery and dangerous adversary as the Gray Phantom, was already in communication with headquarters, summoning reënforcements. In a few minutes he would be hemmed in on all sides and pounced upon by overwhelming numbers of policemen, and in a little while the newspapers would shriek the sensation that at last the Gray Phantom had been captured.

It surprised him that he could view the end of his career with philosophical calm, unaffected by vain regrets. He had always suspected that some day an overbold play on his part would result in his undoing, and he had trained himself to look upon his ultimate defeat with the indifference of a cynic and fatalist, but he had never guessed that the crisis would come like this. He smiled faintly as it dawned on him that the disaster which now stared him in the face was the direct result of his determination to vindicate himself in the eyes of a woman. He had

played for high stakes in the past, but Helen Hardwick's faith in him was the highest of them all.

His smile faded as quickly as it had come. There was a sting in the realization that his boldest and biggest game was foredoomed to failure. Only a few more minutes of liberty remained, and after that all chance of exculpating himself would be gone. Officer Pinto, having become famous of a sudden as the Gray Phantom's captor, would now, more than ever before, be beyond suspicion, and he could be depended upon to make the most of his advantage. The Phantom, whose hands had never been sullied by contact with blood, would be an object of horror and loathing as the perpetrator of a vile and sordid murder. Helen Hardwick, like all the rest, would shudder at mention of his name.

The dismal thoughts went like flashes through his mind. Only a few minutes had passed since the door slammed. The thought of Helen Hardwick caused a sudden stiffening of his figure and imbued him with a fierce desire for freedom. He refused to believe that his star had set and that this was the end. Many a time he had wriggled out of corners seemingly as tight and unescapable as the present one, chuckling at the discomfiture of the police and the bedevilment of his foes. Why could he not achieve another of the astounding feats that had made his name famous?

He spurred his wits to furious effort, repeatedly telling himself that somewhere there must be a way out. It was hard to believe that a man like Sylvanus Gage, living in constant danger of a surprise visit by the police, had not provided himself with an emergency exit. Despite the failure of the detectives to find it, there must be a concealed door or secret

passage somewhere, though without doubt it was hidden in a way worthy of Gage's foxlike cunning.

He ran to the door and shot the bolt. The police would be forced to break their way in, and this would give him a few moments' respite. Again, as several times before in the last few minutes, his eyes strayed to the window. Though he knew it was far too narrow to afford a means of escape, it kept attracting his gaze and tantalizing his imagination. Deciding to make a second attempt, he hastened across the floor, pushed up the lower sash, and edged his shoulder into the opening. Writhe and wriggle as he might, he could not squeeze through. Even a man of Gage's scrawny build would have become wedged in the frame had he attempted it.

Outside the house a gong clanged, signaling the arrival of the police patrol. From the front came sharp commands and excited voices. Already, the Phantom guessed, a cordon was being thrown around the block, ensnaring him like a fish in a net. Precious moments passed, and still he was unable to take his eyes from the window. A vague and unaccountable instinct told him that his only hope of safety lay in that direction.

He raised the shade a little and looked out upon a court disfigured by ramshackle sheds and heaps of refuse. Several temporary hiding places awaited him out there, if he could only get through the window. Even an extra inch or two added to its width would enable him to wriggle out of the trap. But how——

The answer came to him with sudden, blinding force. Yet it was simple and obvious enough; in fact, the only reason he had not thought of it before was that his mind had been searching for something more intricate and remote. It had not occurred to him that the extra inch or two that he needed could

be provided by the simple expedient of dislodging the window frame.

Already his fingers were tearing and tugging at the woodwork. He noticed that the casements were thick, so that the removal of the frame would give him considerable additional space, yet he had been at work only a few moments when he discovered that his plan was far more difficult of execution than he had expected. The frame, at first glance, ill-fitting and insecurely fastened, resisted all his efforts. His nails were torn and there were bleeding scratches on his fingers. He looked about him for something that he could use as a lever.

Someone was trying the lock, then came a loud pounding on the door.

"Open!" commanded a voice.

The Phantom, failing to find any implement that would serve his purpose, inserted his fingers beneath the sill and tugged with all his strength.

"Come and get me!" was the taunt he flung back over his shoulder. Then he pulled again, but the sill did not yield. He straightened his body and attacked the perpendicular frame to the right, but again he encountered nothing but solid resistance.

"The game's up, Phantom," said the voice outside the door. "Might as well give in. If you don't we'll bust the door."

The Phantom worked with frantic strength. His knuckles were bruised, his muscles ached, and sweat poured from his forehead.

"I'll drill a hole through the first man who enters this room," he cried loudly, hoping that the threat would cause the men outside to hesitate for a few moments longer before battering down the door. Then, placing his feet on the sill, he centered his efforts on the horizontal bar at the top.

A quick glance through the window revealed a broad-shouldered man in uniform standing with his back to a shed. Evidently the cordon was tightening. Even if he succeeded in getting through the window, he would have to fight his way through a human barrier. The outlook was almost hopeless, but he persisted with the tenacity that comes of despair. He sprang from the sill, turned the electric light switch, plunging the room into darkness and hiding his movements from the eyes of the man outside, then leaped back to his former position and tugged frenziedly at the horizontal piece.

Of a sudden his hand slipped and a metallic protuberance scratched his wrist. With habitual attention to detail, he wound his handkerchief around the injured surface, stopping the flow of blood. If by a miracle he should succeed in getting out, he did not care to leave behind any clews to his movements. Another sharp glance through the window satisfied him that the man at the shed was not looking in his direction. Then he ran his fingers along the horizontal frame, found the object that had wounded him, and discovered that it was a nail.

The hubbub outside the door had ceased momentarily. Suddenly there came a loud crash, as if a heavy body had dashed against the door. The Phantom, a suspicion awakening amid the jumble of his racing thoughts, fingered the nail, twisting it hither and thither. It occurred to him in a twinkling that it was an odd place for a nail, since it could serve no apparent purpose. In a calmer moment he would have thought nothing of it, but his mind was keyed to that tremendous pitch where minor details are magnified.

Another crash sounded, accompanied by an ominous squeaking of cracking timber. He bent the

nail to one side, noticing that its resistance to pressure was elastic, differing from the inert feel of objects firmly imbedded in solid wood. An inspiration came to him out of the stress of the moment. He twisted the nail in various directions, at the same time tugging energetically at a corner of the frame.

Once more a smashing force was hurled against the door, followed by a portentous, splintering crack. Quivering with suspense, his mind fixed with desperate intentness on a dim, tantalizing hope, the Phantom continued to bend and twist the nail at all possible angles. He knew that at any moment the door was likely to collapse, and then——

He uttered a hoarse cry of elation. Of a sudden, as he bent the nail in a new direction, it gave a quick rebound, and in the same instant the frame yielded to his steady pull, as if swinging on a hinge, revealing an opening in the side of the uncommonly massive wall. For a moment his discovery dazed him, then a terrific crash at the door caused him to pull himself together, and in a moment he had squeezed his figure into the aperture.

He drew a long breath and wiped the blinding, smarting perspiration from his face. Thanks to an accidental scratch on the wrist, he had discovered Sylvanus Gage's emergency exit. And none too soon, for already, with a splitting crash, the door had collapsed under the repeated onslaughts of the men outside, and several shadowy forms were bursting headlong into the room.

The Phantom, wedged in the narrow opening, seized the side of the revolving frame and drew it to. A little click signified that a spring had caught it and was holding it in place. Excited voices, muffled by the intervening obstruction, reached his ears. He smiled as he pictured the consternation of the detec-

tives upon discovering that once more the Gray Phantom had lived up to his name and achieved another of the amazing escapes that had made him feared and secretly admired by the keenest sleuths in the country.

He had no fear that the police would follow him, for his discovery of the secret exit had been partly accidental and partly due to the accelerated nimbleness of mind that comes to one laboring under tremendous pressure. To the police the nail on the top of the window frame would be nothing but a nail. It is the hunted, not the hunter, whose mind clutches at straws, and they would never guess that the nail was a lever in disguise. The Phantom, as he contemplated the ingenious arrangement, found his respect for the dead man's inventiveness rising several notches.

From the other side of the wall came loud curses, mingling with dazed exclamations, baffled shouts and expressions of incredulity. With a laugh at the discomfiture of his pursuers, who but a few moments ago had thought him inextricably trapped, the Phantom moved a little farther into the opening. It appeared to be slanting slowly into the ground, and it was so narrow that each wriggling and writhing movement bruised some portion of his body. Inch by inch he worked his way downward, wondering whither the passage might lead. Now the voices in the room were almost beyond earshot, and he could hear nothing but a low, confused din.

Presently he felt solid ground at his feet, and at this point the passage turned in a horizontal direction. There was a slight current of dank air in the tunnel, suggesting that its opposite terminus might be a cellar or other subterranean compartment. Limbs aching, he moved forward, with slow twists

and coilings of the body. He estimated that he had already covered half a dozen yards, and he wondered how much farther the passage might reach. One thing puzzled him as he writhed onward. Why had Gage not made use of the secret exit on the night of the murder? Was it, perhaps, because the murderer had come upon him so suddenly that he had not had time to reach the hidden opening?

He dismissed the question as too speculative. A few more twists and jerks, and he found himself in an open space where he could stand upright and move about freely. For a few moments he fumbled around in the inky darkness, finally encountering a stairway. He ascended as quietly as he could, taking pains that the squeakings of the decaying stairs should not disturb the occupants above. Reaching the top, he listened intently while his hand searched for a doorknob. Slowly and with infinite caution he pushed the door open. Again he stopped and listened. The room was dark and still, and he could distinguish no objects, yet his alert mind sensed a presence, and he felt a pair of sharp eyes gazing at him through the shadows.

Then, out of the gloom and silence came a voice: "Don't move!"

The words were a bit theatrical, but the voice caused him to start sharply. A few paces ahead of him he saw a blurry shape. His hand darted to his hip pocket; then he remembered that he had left his pistol in the grip at his hotel, for when he started out he had not expected that his enterprise would so soon take a critical turn.

"Hold up your hands," commanded the voice, and again an odd quiver shot through the Phantom.

Nonchalantly he found his case and thrust a cigarette between his lips. Then he struck a match,

advanced a few paces, gazed sharply ahead as the fluttering flame illuminated the scene, and came to a dead stop.

He was looking straight into the muzzle of a pistol, and directly behind the bluishly gleaming barrel he saw the face of Helen Hardwick.

CHAPTER VII

DOCTOR BIMBLE'S LABORATORY

SHE was the last person the Gray Phantom had expected to see at that moment, and this was the last place where he would have dreamed of finding her. He stared into her face until the flame of the match bit his fingers.

"You!" He dropped the stub and trampled it under his foot. She stood rigid in the shadows, and the wan glint of the pistol barrel told that she was still pointing the weapon at him. Her breath came fast, with little soblike gasps, as if she were trying to stifle a violent emotion.

"How did you get here?" she demanded, her voice scarcely above a whisper.

"By a tight squeeze," he said lightly. "I must be a sight."

"You came through the—tunnel?"

"I did as a matter of fact, though I don't see how you guessed it."

Staring at her through the dusk, the Phantom was conscious that his statement had exerted a profound effect upon her. She drew a long breath, and her figure, scarcely distinguishable in the gloom, seemed to shrink away from him.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, an odd throb in her voice. "Then you did it!"

"Did what?"

"Murdered Sylvanus Gage."

The Phantom shook his head. "You deduce I am a murderer from the fact that I got here through a tunnel. Well, that may be very good feminine logic, but——"

"It is excellent logic, my friend," interrupted a voice somewhere in the darkness; and in the same moment there came a click, and a bright electric light flooded the scene. The Phantom had a brief glimpse of a ludicrous little man with an oversized head, a round protuberance of stomach, and short, thin legs encased in tightly fitting trousers; then he turned to Helen Hardwick and gazed intently into her large, misty-bright eyes.

"Oh, they're brown, I see," he murmured. "I had a notion they were either blue or gray. Queer how one forgets."

The girl looked as though utterly unable to understand his levity, for as such she evidently construed his remark. The thin-legged man stepped away from the door through which he had entered and approached them slowly, giving the Phantom a gravely appraising look over the rims of his glasses. The Phantom had eyes only for Helen Hardwick. He studied her closely, almost reverentially, noticing that her eyes, which upon his entrance had been steady and cool, were now strangely agitated, radiating a dread that seemed to dominate her entire being. The hand that clutched the pistol trembled a trifle, and there were signs of an extreme tension in the poise of the strong, slender figure, in the quivering nostrils, and in the pallor that suffused the smooth oval of her face.

"Remarkable!" murmured the spectacled individual, drawing a few steps closer to obtain a clearer view of the Phantom. "The young lady and myself are covering you with our pistols, and yet you exhibit

no fear whatever. Most remarkable! May I feel your pulse, sir?"

The Phantom's lips twitched at the corners as he looked at the speaker. The latter's automatic, pointed at a somewhat indefinite part of the Phantom's body, seemed ludicrously large in contrast with the slight stature of the man himself.

"My name, sir," declared the little man with an air of vast importance, "is Doctor Tyson Bimble. You may have heard of me. I have written several treatises on the subject of criminal anthropology, and my professional services have occasionally been enlisted by the police. Not that such work interests me," he added quickly. "The solution of crime mysteries and the capture of criminals are the pastimes of inferior minds. As a man of science, I am interested solely in the criminal himself, his mental and physical characteristics and the congenital traits that distinguish him. Again I ask you if I may feel your pulse."

Smiling, the Phantom extended his hand. Admonishing Miss Hardwick to keep a steady aim, Doctor Bimble pocketed his own weapon and took out his watch.

"Perfectly normal," he declared when the examination was finished. "At first I thought that at least a part of your superb coolness was simulated. It is all the more remarkable in view of the fact that at this very moment you are surrounded on all sides by the police. They have thrown a cordon around the block and every house is being systematically searched."

The Phantom stiffened. His abrupt and unexpected meeting with Helen Hardwick had momentarily blunted his sense of caution, causing him to forget that he was still in imminent danger. He

threw her a quick glance noticing a look of alarm in her face. He made a rapid appraisal of the situation. His flight through the tunnel could not have taken him more than twelve or fifteen yards from the rear of the Gage establishment, and he was almost certain that the passage had extended in a straight southerly direction. Consequently the place in which he now found himself must be one of the shed-like structures he had seen from the window of Gage's bedroom.

His eyes opened wide as he looked around. Whatever the place might look like from the outside, the interior certainly did not have the appearance of a shed. It was a strange setting, and it seemed all the stranger because he had found Helen Hardwick in it. At one end was a long bench covered with bottles, glass jars, tubes, and a queer-looking assortment of chemical apparatus. The walls were lined with rows of tall cabinets with glass doors, each containing a skeleton, and above these was a frieze of photographs and X-ray prints in black frames.

He wondered how Miss Hardwick happened to be in such strange surroundings. Her large, long-lashed eyes avoided him, and her right hand, cramped about the handle of the pistol, wavered a trifle. She had changed since their last meeting, he noticed. She had seemed half child and half woman then, a vivacious young creature with a mixture of reckless audacity, demure wistfulness and adorable shyness whose bewildering contradictions had enhanced a loveliness that had gone to the Phantom's head like foaming wine. In the course of a few months she had acquired the subtle and indefinable something that differentiates girlhood from womanhood. Her face—he had liked to think of it as heart-shaped—had sobered a little, and the

graceful lines of chin and throat seemed firmer. Faintly penciled shadows at the corners of her lips hinted that a touch of somberness had crept into her mood, but even such a trifling detail as a few wisps of loosened hair dangling sportively against her cheeks seemed to go a long way toward upsetting this effect.

Doctor Bimble's thin and rasping voice startled the Phantom out of his reverie.

"My laboratory, sir," he explained with a comprehensive wave of the hand. "What you see here is probably the most remarkable collection of its kind in the world. Each of these skeletons represents a distinct criminal type. Here, for instance are the bones of Raschenell, the famous apache. They are supposed to be buried in a cemetery in Paris, but a certain French official for whom I once did a favor was obliging. In my private rogues' gallery you see photographs of some of the most notorious criminals the world has ever known, and these X-ray pictures illustrate various pathological conditions usually associated with criminal tendencies. Quite remarkable, you will admit."

"Quite," said the Phantom a little absently, as if his mind were occupied with more pressing matters than the bones of notorious malefactors.

"You may feel perfectly at ease, my friend." The little doctor, noticing the Phantom's abstraction, spoke soothingly. "I think I have already made it clear that the pursuit and capture of criminals don't interest me. Without doubt we shall arrive at some amicable understanding that will insure your safety."

"Understanding?" echoed the Phantom, having detected a slight but significant emphasis on the word.

"Yes; why not? You have interested me for some

time, Mr.—ahem. Let me see—I believe your real name is Cuthbert Vanardy?"

The Phantom nodded.

"Making due allowance for the exaggerations of stupid newspaper writers, I have long recognized that you are a remarkable individual. Yes, remarkable. You do not belong to any of the types mentioned by Prichard, Pinel, and Lombroso, but you are a type of your own. Naturally you arouse my scientific curiosity. Nothing would please me more than to add you to my collection."

The Phantom glanced at the grisly contents of the cabinets. A serio-comic grin wrinkled his face. "Aren't you a bit hasty, doctor? I am not dead yet, you know."

"True—quite true. But a man like you leads a precarious existence. If he doesn't break his neck in some rash adventure the electric chair is always a menacing possibility. The chances are that I shall outlive you by a score of years. Promise that you will give the matter due consideration."

The Phantom blinked his eyes. Doctor Bimble seemed amiable enough, yet the man was scarcely human. His whole being was wrapped up in his science and his entire world was composed of anthropological specimens and fine-spun theories.

"You wish me to make arrangements to have my body turned over to you after my death?"

"Precisely, Mr. Vanardy. That is what my friend and neighbor, Sylvanus Gage, did. An inferior personality, yet he had his points of interest. I am obliged to you for hastening his demise."

A tremulous gasp sounded in the room. The Phantom turned, and his brow clouded as he noticed the expression of anguish that had crossed Helen's face at the doctor's words.

"You're mistaken, Bimble," he declared sharply; "I didn't kill Gage. If I had done so, I should scarcely be here at the present moment."

Doctor Bimble shrugged his shoulders. "The matter is of little consequence, my dear sir. Whether or not you killed Gage is not of the slightest interest to me. However," with a significant glance at Vanardy's mud-streaked clothing and begrimed features, "I am strongly of the opinion that you did. The only thing that perplexes me is that you are taking the trouble to deny it. Did I hear you say that you came here through the tunnel?"

"I did." As he spoke the two words, the Phantom felt Helen's eyes searching his face.

"Enough." The anthropologist made a gesture expressive of finality. "Your admission that you came through the tunnel is an admission that you killed Gage. I perceive you do not follow me. Well, then, the circumstances of the crime prove conclusively that it was committed by someone who was aware of the existence of the tunnel. What the foolish newspapers refer to as astounding and miraculous is simplicity itself. The murderer entered Gage's bedchamber by way of the underground passage and made his escape by the same route. Nothing could be simpler."

The Phantom laughed mirthlessly. The doctor's theory, though at first glance shallow and far-fetched, impressed him uncomfortably, instilling in his mind an idea that had not occurred to him until now. Helen, standing a few paces away, was regarding him intently.

"To-day, I infer, you returned to the scene of your crime," continued the doctor, speaking in the dry tones of one developing a thesis. "Criminals often do, but why you, a superior type, should exhibit

the same failing is beyond me. Some time in the near future I shall write a monograph on the subject, with particular reference to your individual case. However, the fact remains that you returned to the scene of your crime. I take it that by some blunder or careless move you betrayed your presence. At any rate, you found yourself trapped in Gage's bedchamber. What more natural than that, for the second time within a week, you should use the tunnel as a means of escape?"

The Phantom was silent for a moment. Helen Hardwick seemed to be searching his soul with eyes that gave him a distressing impression of doubt, suspicion, and reproach.

"You're mistaken." He was addressing the doctor, but the effect of his words was intended for the girl. "I went to Gage's house this afternoon, hoping to find some clew to the murderer."

"Ah!" The doctor's chuckle expressed amusement. "You were acting on the idea that it takes a crook to catch a crook, I suppose. Go on. Your ingenious explanations are diverting."

"I found myself cornered," continued the Phantom, stifling his resentment. "With the house surrounded and the police pounding on the door, I had only a few moments in which to find a way out. I used the tunnel, but I discovered the opening by merest accident."

"Impossible—flatly impossible! Yes, I see your wrist is scratched, but that proves nothing. That opening, my dear sir, could never have been discovered by accident."

"You seem to know something about it yourself," remarked the Phantom pointedly.

"I do," admitted the anthropologist, with a broad grin.

"And the tunnel runs into the cellar of your house."

"So it does." The doctor seemed not at all disturbed by Vanardy's sharp gaze. "Years ago, when I was looking for an inconspicuous and out-of-the-way place in which to pursue my studies in quiet, I leased the house to which this laboratory forms an extension. I saw Gage now and then, and the man interested me. Even before we became confidential I had noticed phrenological manifestations that seemed to classify him as belonging to one of the types described by Lombroso. Step by step I became familiar with his history and mode of life. I learned that he was conducting an extensive traffic in stolen goods, and that he had a broad circle of acquaintances in the underworld. Gage proved useful, introducing me to criminals whom I wished to study at close range, and, in addition to that, the man himself interested me. I saw traits and peculiarities in him that were strangely contradictory. And so, when one day he confided to me that he was living in constant fear of the police, who were likely to raid his premises at any time and confiscate his valuables, I made a proposition to him."

"You offered to help on the condition that he sign his body over to you for dissecting purposes," guessed the Phantom.

"Exactly, my friend." Bimble rubbed his hands in glee. "I offered to invent an avenue of escape that would be absolutely safe and proof against detection. Gage accepted, and I set to work fulfilling my part of the bargain. The result, if I may bestow compliments on myself, was a work of genius."

The Phantom gazed in frank astonishment at the versatile anthropologist. "The police have a nasty name for that sort of thing," he observed.

"The police and I are friends. I help them on occasions, when the spirit moves me and the case interests me. And a scientific man, my dear sir, cannot afford to have moral scruples. The ends of science justify all other things, even assisting a criminal to escape. Incidentally I derived a lot of entertainment out of the planning of the tunnel. In the first place, the window was purposely built so small that no one would consider it for a moment as a possible means of escape. Still less would any one think of looking for an exit hidden behind the frame of such a window. You noticed the nail, of course. A lot of psychology is centered around that nail."

"So it's a psychological nail, eh?" The Phantom looked at the scratch on his wrist.

"I knew, from my observations of the workings of the human mind, that not one person in ten million would give a second thought to that nail. Even if, by remote chance, someone should touch it, he would never suspect that it was a part of a mechanism. If, by a still remoter chance, he would investigate more closely, he would not know how to operate it. So, you see, there is not one chance in a billion that a stranger would find the tunnel. Do you blame me for doubting your statement that you found it by accident?"

The Phantom looked at Miss Hardwick. Doctor Bimble's explanation seemed to have impressed her strongly. He did not wonder at this, for he knew there was logic in the anthropologist's argument. Nothing but his firm belief that Gage had provided himself with an emergency exit of some sort had prompted the Phantom to give the nail a closer scrutiny.

Doctor Bimble gave him a mildly amused look.

"You agree with me—don't you, Vanardy? I think my logic holds together. Only a person familiar with the tunnel could have committed the murder. Conversely, a person betraying a knowledge of the tunnel is a worthy object of suspicion."

"Haven't you forgotten something?" The Phantom suddenly called to mind his own theory of the crime. "One other person could have committed the murder without a knowledge of the tunnel."

"Yes, I know," said the doctor wearily. "You are thinking of Officer Pinto. The possibility that he might be the guilty one occurred to me as soon as I saw the newspaper account, but the probabilities of the case controverted that view. Officer Pinto is an honest, dull-witted, conscientious soul—nothing else. That kind of man doesn't com——"

The jangling of a bell in front of the house interrupted him. There was a humorous twinkle in his eyes as he looked at the Phantom over the rims of his spectacles. Helen inhaled sharply.

"The police have come to search the house, I think," Doctor Bimble murmured languidly. "My man Jerome—an estimable fellow, by the way—is already admitting them. In a few moments they will be coming this way. Of course, if I tell them that I have seen nothing of a fugitive, they will go away without making an extended search."

Vanardy stiffened. His head went up and his eyes narrowed; then he glanced quizzically at the doctor. It seemed to him that Bimble had stressed the word *if,* as though a condition were implied.

"Well, Vanardy?" The anthropologist's tone was light and playful. Sounds of distant footfalls reached their ears. The Phantom's darting eyes rested for an instant on one of the skeletons, and in

a twinkling he understood. He laughed shortly, for the idea impressed him as grotesquely humorous.

"I see," he said quickly. "You'll say the necessary word to the police if I agree to dedicate my earthly remains to your private hall of fame."

"You grasp my meaning exactly. But the time is short and I sha'n't press you for a definite promise. Only give me your word that you will consider the proposition."

"Very well; I'll consider it," promised the Phantom. "But I warn you that I have no burning ambition to become a skeleton for some time yet."

A pleased grin wrinkled the doctor's face. The footfalls, mingling with gruff voices, were coming closer, signifying that the searchers were rapidly approaching the laboratory.

"This way, Vanardy." The doctor beckoned the Phantom to follow as he started toward the door. Approaching footsteps caused him to draw back. A look of bewilderment came into his face.

"We have wasted too much time," he said complainingly; then, as he looked about the room, his face brightened. "But this will do for a hiding place. Better come along, Miss Hardwick. It may save you embarrassing questions."

He stepped hurriedly to one side of the room, opened a door and motioned them into a narrow closet. A moment later they heard a key turn in the lock.

CHAPTER VIII

LOGIC VERSUS HEART THROBS

A VAGUE misgiving assailed the Phantom as the door closed. The hiding place chosen for them by the genial Doctor Bimble seemed not quite adequate to the emergency. There had been no time for argument, however, and nothing for the Phantom to do but follow instructions. The versatile anthropologist knew best, he had thought, and very likely the police would take Bimble's word for it that nobody was concealed in the laboratory.

The closet was so dark that, but for a faint fragrance and the occasional scraping of a foot, he might have thought himself alone. From the other side of the door came subdued sounds, and he pictured the tubby little doctor protesting against the intrusion on his sacred privacy. Of Helen he could see nothing but the pallid glint of her face in the gloom, but her quick, nervous breathing told him that she was keyed up to a high tension. There was a medley of questions in his mind, but he found it hard to put them into words.

"Hel—Miss Hardwick," he whispered.

"Yes?"

"Logic is silly rot."

A moment's pause. "I don't believe I understand."

"According to the learned doctor's logic, I am the murderer of Sylvanus Gage. He made out quite a

convincing case, and I could see you were impressed. Yet, deep down in your heart, you know he was talking piffle. You don't believe I killed Gage."

She stood silent for a time. He pressed closer to the wall and fumbled for her hand. It was cold, and the pulsations at the wrist made him think of a frightened, fluttering bird.

"I wish I could believe you didn't," she murmured, freeing her hand.

"Thank you." Her candor had given him a little thrill of faint and indefinable hope. "Would it surprise you very much if I told you that my only reason for leaving Sea Glimpse was to convince you of my innocence?"

"Convince *me?*" She gave a low, incredulous laugh. "Why?"

"I'm not sure I can tell you that. From a practical point of view it was a foolish move, wasn't it? By the way, you knew that the police were hunting high and low for me. You alone knew where I was to be found, and yet you didn't tell. I wonder why."

She meditated for a little; then, in a whisper: "I don't know."

He laughed softly. "It seems neither one of us is very practical. We don't understand our own motives. Can you tell me what you are doing in this gallery of skeletons?"

"I am not sure, but I will try. The morning after the murder of Gage, I read the accounts in all the papers. I can't tell you how I felt. It was as if a great illusion had been shattered. I remember how I cried one day when I fell and broke my first doll. My feelings after reading the papers were something like that, only more poignant."

"I understand," he murmured. "You had placed the Gray Phantom on a pedestal. When he fell and

broke to bits, just like common clay, you were disappointed."

"Yes, it was something like that. I had placed your better self on a pedestal. I didn't want to believe it had fallen or that it was just common clay. I read the papers very carefully; hoping to find a weak point in the evidence against you, but it seemed complete and conclusive down to the tiniest detail. One of the articles puzzled me a little, though."

"Oh—the *Sphere's!* Yes, I noticed it, too."

"It read as though the writer were not quite sure that you were the guilty one. After thinking it over for a while I called up the *Sphere* and asked for the reporter who had written the article. They had some little trouble finding him, and when he finally came to the 'phone he acted as if he were not quite sober. I tried to question him about the case, but he gruffly told me he had nothing to tell aside from what he had put into his story. If I had a personal interest in the matter, he said, the best thing I could do was go and consult Doctor Bimble."

"And you adopted the suggestion?"

"I had never heard of Doctor Bimble, but the reporter told me he was the cleverest investigator of criminal cases in town. He warned me that Doctor Bimble might refuse to help me, since he accepted nothing but cases of unusual interest, but the fact that the murdered man was a friend and neighbor might make a difference. Yesterday I called on the doctor, but at first he would talk of nothing but his skeletons. The murder didn't seem to interest him in the least. He said the Phantom's guilt was clear and that all that remained was to catch him. Then, when he saw how earnest I was, he told me about the tunnel."

"The doctor is a queer duck," murmured the Phantom musingly. "The ordinary man wouldn't

take strangers into his confidence about such things. The eccentricity of genius, I suppose."

"The whole affair seemed to bore him immensely. He told me the man who killed Gage must have used the tunnel, since he could not have left the room any other way. He thought it possible the murderer was still hiding there, lying low until the excitement should die down, and if I didn't have anything better to do I might watch for him at this end. As for himself, he said he wasn't at all concerned in the apprehension and punishment of criminals, but he gave me his revolver and told me I might watch the door leading from the laboratory, since the murderer, if he were still in the tunnel, had to come out that way. I think my interest in the case amused the doctor. I suspected he was chuckling at me most of the time.

"I watched the door till late last night, all the time hoping that, if anyone came out of the tunnel, it would not be you. Shortly before midnight I persuaded the doctor to let his man take my place. You see, if the murderer proved to be anyone but you, I wanted him caught, because then your innocence would be established. Early this morning I went back to my post. When I heard steps on the stairs my heart stood still for a moment. As the door opened I felt like shrieking. And then——"

She broke off with a gasp. From above came the sounds of footsteps and doors slamming, indicating that the police were searching the upper part of the house.

"And when you saw me," the Phantom put in, "you immediately jumped to the conclusion that I was guilty. Well, I suppose it was good logic. What can I do or say to convince you that I didn't kill Gage?"

"Nothing," she said, a hysterical catch in her throat. Of a sudden she seemed cold and distant, as if realizing that in telling her story she had betrayed too much of her feelings. "I fear there is nothing more to be said."

The Phantom drew a deep breath. "I don't blame you," he said gently. "There are several black chapters in my past. But some day I'll prove to you that I had nothing to do with this murder. I admit that just now the evidence weighs heavily against me. It is true there was something of a feud between me and Gage once upon a time and——"

"And the threatening letter," she interrupted. "Why did you send it if you didn't mean to kill him?"

"It was a forgery. I never wrote it."

"Handwriting experts say you did."

"I know." He remembered having read in the newspapers that three experts had compared the letter with samples of his handwriting on file in the bureau of criminal identification, and that two of them had declared that the Phantom had written it. "That only goes to show that it was an exceptionally clever forgery, and experts have been known to differ before."

"But Gage told the officer that it was you who stabbed him." She spoke as if determined to hear his explanation of the damning bits of evidence even though every word hurt her.

"True enough. But Gage didn't see me. He had the threatening letter in mind when he said that."

"Nothing but the Maltese cross was missing, and you had had a quarrel with Gage about that."

"True, too." The Phantom chuckled bitterly. "If I had committed the murder I should have taken pains to carry away a lot of other things for a blind."

She was silent for a few moments. Footsteps were coming down the stairs, and the Phantom knew that the searchers would soon be in the laboratory. Again he found her hand, but she quickly drew it away.

"You knew about the tunnel," she reminded him, her shaky accents betraying the struggle going on within her.

"I swear that I found it by accident."

He could not see her face, but he sensed that she doubted him and that the remnant of faith in her heart was unable to withstand the corroding effect of a growing suspicion. The footsteps were drawing closer, and now they could hear voices outside the door. He recognized the rasping accents of Doctor Bimble.

"I tell you, my dear sir, that the closet contains nothing but chemicals which I use in my laboratory work. Some of them are very valuable. That's why I keep them under lock and key."

Tensing every muscle as if preparing for an attack, the Phantom stepped in front of the girl. She made no protest as he took her pistol, which she had been holding all the time and which now hung limply from her fingers.

"I don't doubt your word," answered a gruff voice outside, "but orders are to search everywhere and make a good job of it. Hate to trouble you, but it's got to be done."

The doctor, evidently sparring for time, insisted that he had been in his laboratory all day and that nobody could have slipped into the closet unnoticed by him; but the other was obdurate.

"Very well, then," finally grumbled the anthropologist, "but I shall make complaint to Inspector Wadham. Jerome, where are my keys?"

Despite the suspense under which he was laboring, the Phantom grinned. He strongly suspected that Bimble was working a ruse in order to gain time. Yet he wondered what the outcome was to be, for unless the keys were promptly produced the officers would undoubtedly force the door.

His next sensation was one of astonishment. A curious calm appeared to have fallen over the group outside, for moment after moment passed without a word being spoken. The Phantom wondered what it could mean. It seemed as though the speakers had been suddenly stricken dumb. After what seemed a long period of silence, somebody uttered an exclamation of astonishment, then a laugh sounded, and next footsteps moved away from the closet door. A minute or so passed, then someone fumbled with the lock, and presently the door was opened by Doctor Bimble. He was smiling blandly, but the Phantom thought he detected an uneasy gleam behind the spectacles.

"What's happened?" he inquired, looking about him dazedly and noticing that the girl and himself were alone with the doctor.

The anthropologist waved a hand toward the front of the house. "Listen!"

From the streets came loud and raucous shouts, and a blank look crossed the Phantom's face as he made out the words:

"Uxtra! Gray Phantom capchured! All 'bout the big pinch! Uxtra!"

CHAPTER IX

THE PHANTOM IS MYSTIFIED

FOR a time the little group in the laboratory stood as if turned into inanimate shapes, their senses under the spell of the hoarse shouts in the street. The Phantom felt a curious churning in his head. The anthropologist was still smiling, but the smile was gradually growing thin and hard. Helen fixed the Phantom with a stony look.

"It appears a mistake of some kind has been made," muttered the doctor at length. "It was a fortunate one for you, my friends, for the officers were becoming quite insistent. Luckily the cries diverted their attention from the closet, and they went away apologizing after telephoning headquarters and verifying the report."

The Phantom, still feeling Helen's gaze on his face, pocketed the pistol he had been holding. The newsboys' cries had given him a jolt that left him a little dazed and caused his mind to turn to trivial things. He found himself admiring Helen's simple little hat and plain but tasteful dress, noticing that they seemed as much a part of her as her hair and her complexion. He saw that she tried to be brave despite a crushing disaster to her illusions, and somehow he felt sorry for her.

Doctor Bimble turned on him with a frown.

"Sir," he demanded, "are you the Gray Phantom or merely a clumsy impostor?"

The question seemed so ludicrous that the Phantom could only chuckle.

"It has long been my desire to meet the Gray Phantom," pursued the doctor, still scowling darkly. "I should dislike to think I have been imposed upon. But that can't be, unless"—with another suspicious look—"you are acting as a foil for the Phantom. Well, we shall see presently, I suppose. In the meantime, you may consider yourself at home under my roof."

Without knowing why, the Phantom hesitated before accepting the invitation. To take advantage of the doctor's hospitality was clearly the proper thing to do. In a little while the police would learn they had blundered, and then the man hunt would be resumed with redoubled vigor. To venture forth on the streets after that would be little short of madness. The Phantom, conquering his misgivings —which, after all, were nothing more than a vague doubt in regard to the doctor—murmured his appreciation.

Bimble's manservant, a lanky, thin-faced individual with a gloomy expression and wary eye, entered with a copy of the extras. The Phantom gave him a quick and keenly searching glance, and again he felt strangely bewildered. The man looked innocent enough, and it was nothing but an intangible something in his gait and his manner of carrying himself that caused the Phantom to look twice.

Doctor Bimble took the damp sheet, still redolent of ink, and read aloud the triple-leaded article under the scare head. During the perusal Helen regarded him with strange, expressionless eyes, while now and then the servant shot the Phantom a stealthy glance which the latter found hard to interpret.

Evidently the extra had been hurriedly prepared,

for the article contained only a few pithy facts. It seemed that the Phantom, with an audacity and a recklessness characteristic of him, had for some unaccountable purpose visited the East Houston Street establishment in which the murder of Sylvanus Gage had been perpetrated. Wearing no other disguise than a black beard, which he had evidently grown since his last appearance in public, he had approached the housekeeper, introduced himself as Mr. Adair, of Boston, a criminal investigator, and requested to inspect the scene of the murder. The unsuspecting housekeeper had admitted him, little guessing that her visitor was one of the most celebrated criminals of the age.

The Gray Phantom had been in the room only a few minutes when Officer Joshua Pinto appeared on the scene. With laudable perspicacity the officer recognized the Phantom almost immediately, despite the disguising beard, and by clever maneuvering managed to lock him in the room, standing guard outside the door while the housekeeper telephoned headquarters. In a few moments an impenetrable cordon had been thrown around the house, and the capture of the Phantom seemed an absolute certainty. Yet, when the door was battered down, the astonished officers saw that the room was empty and that the notorious rogue had achieved another of his miraculous escapes.

Apparently, so the article stated, the Phantom had accomplished the impossible, but then the Phantom's entire career had been a series of incredible accomplishments. How he had managed to leave the room and elude the cordon of police would probably remain a mystery forever unless the criminal himself should divulge the secret. His capture, which had taken place while the police were making a system-

atic search of the houses in the block, had been due to one of the strange aberrations which seize even the astutest criminals. A brawl had occurred in a "blind pig" in Bleecker Street, and the commotion had attracted the attention of a passing sergeant. After sending in a hurry call for help the sergeant had raided the place, and among the prisoners taken was one who was almost instantly recognized as the Gray Phantom. The identification was rendered all the easier by the fact that he had removed his beard after making his sensational escape from the East Houston Street establishment. The belief was expressed that the prisoner would be induced to make a statement as soon as he had recovered from the effects of the raw whiskey he had consumed in the dive, presumably in celebration of his latest coup.

"Rot!" ejaculated the doctor, throwing the paper down with a gesture of disgust. "A fool would know that a man of the Gray Phantom's temperament, whatever other folly he might commit, would not get intoxicated at a critical moment like this. This proves— But what's become of Miss Hardwick?"

The Phantom looked up with a start. The girl was gone. Evidently she had taken advantage of the other's absorption in the newspaper article to slip out unnoticed. Jerome, a crestfallen look on his long face, hastily left the laboratory, returning in a few moments with the report that Miss Hardwick was nowhere in sight. The Phantom imagined that there was an expression of sharp reproach in the doctor's eyes as they rested on the servant, but the impression was fleeting.

"The young lady has probably gone home," ventured the anthropologist. "She must have been tired, and in a measure her task was accomplished. The

question is, can you rely on her not to communicate what she knows to the police?"

The Phantom looked a trifle doubtful. He had perceived that the impulses of her heart had been swamped by logic. It was possible she had gone away hating him, firmly convinced he was a murderer, and in that event her sense of duty might easily overcome everything else.

"Frankly, I don't know," he declared. "At any rate, I am about as safe here as anywhere for the present. I should like a bath, if I may presume on your hospitality."

"By all means. And as soon as you have rested a bit we shall dine. Dear me, it is almost nine o'clock! Jerome!"

He instructed the servant, and the Phantom followed the silent and soft-footed man to the bathroom. As he splashed about in the tub, he tried to forget the bitter ache which Helen's words had left in his heart. Her frigid attitude and her abrupt going away had merely strengthened his determination to convince her of his innocence. He saw that he must act quickly and take advantage of the comparative security which he could enjoy until the police discovered that they had arrested the wrong man.

His mind was at work on a plan while he hurried into his clothes, which Jerome had brushed and pressed while he was in the tub. A question that troubled him greatly was how far he could safely take Bimble into his confidence. The sharp-witted anthropologist, with his keen insight into human nature, would prove a valuable ally, but the Phantom felt a great deal of mystification in his presence. There was something about the man which his senses could not quite grasp. Likely as not, it was only

the scientific temperament, which gave him an appearance of secretiveness and dissimulation, but of this the Phantom could not be sure.

The dinner, which he ate in the doctor's company, was excellent, and Jerome served them in a faultless manner, proving that the anthropologist's devotion to his science had not blunted his taste for physical comforts. The host discoursed learnedly and brilliantly on Lucchini's theory in regard to the responsibility of the criminal, and it was not until the servant had withdrawn and they had reached their coffee and cigars that he mentioned the subject on the Phantom's mind.

The dining room, furnished with an approach to elegance that one would scarcely have expected to find on such a shabby street, was lighted by a heavily shaded electrolier. The lights and shadows playing across Bimble's face as he gesticulated with his head gave him an added touch of mystery and accentuated the general air of inscrutability that hovered about his person. He broached the subject of Gage's death while lighting his cigar.

"Come now, Vanardy, let us be confidential. It was you who murdered Gage. Why deny it?"

Smiling faintly, the Phantom shook his head.

Bimble regarded him curiously. "The only thing about the crime that interests me is your denial. But I think I understand. In some criminals there is an æsthetic sense which revolts against the vulgar and sordid. Having, on the impulse of the moment, committed a sordid crime, your æsthetic sense reasserts itself, and you want to forget the ugly affair as quickly as possible. Am I right?"

The Phantom laughed. "You clothe the thing in such attractive phrasing that I almost wish I could

plead guilty. But I didn't kill Gage, and that's all there is to it."

"You still insist that Pinto did?"

"Until two or three hours ago I was firmly convinced of it."

"Ah! Now we are getting down to facts. Until two or three hours ago you were certain Pinto was the murderer. Why?"

"Because at the time I felt sure that no one else could have committed the crime. The mysterious circumstances could be explained in no other way than on the assumption that Pinto was the perpetrator."

"Exactly. Your logic was not at all bad. But I infer that within the last three hours you have changed your mind."

"Not quite; I have merely modified my opinion. I am no longer positively certain that Pinto committed the murder."

"Why?" A shrewd grin twisted the anthropologist's lips. "What has caused you to modify your view—the tunnel?"

"Yes, the tunnel. The existence of the tunnel makes it possible for someone other than Pinto to have committed the murder. It suggests another hypothesis, in the light of which all the circumstances are explainable. Without the tunnel I should be morally certain of Pinto's guilt; with it in existence I am no longer sure."

"Bravo, my friend! You are doing very well for an amateur detective. Your idea is that the murderer entered Gage's bedchamber by way of the tunnel and took his departure the same way. Do you know," with a broad grin, "that I thoroughly agree with you? The only point of difference between us is the identity of the human mole."

The Phantom's face darkened a trifle. "I advanced the idea only as a hypothesis," he declared a little testily, "and as yet I am not at all sure that it has any value. For instance, in order to reach Gage's bedroom by way of the tunnel, the murderer had to go through your house and get down in the cellar."

"Which could easily be done. Both Jerome and myself are sound sleepers and the house has no burglar protection."

"But that isn't all. After traversing the tunnel, the murderer had to enter the bedroom. In order to do so he had to work the mechanism which controls the revolving window frame. From the inside of the chamber it is worked by the nail. Can it be manipulated from the outside as well?"

"Dear me!" exclaimed the doctor, almost jumping out of the chair. "I never thought of that."

The Phantom eyed him keenly, though he seemed wholly absorbed in contemplation of the salt shaker. The exclamation, he thought, had not sounded quite natural.

"You invented the contraption," he pointed out. "Surely you ought to know whether the mechanism can be worked by a man approaching the room by way of the tunnel."

"So I thought. An inventor ought to know the children of his brain." He gave a forced chuckle, as if fencing for time in which to frame an answer. "The fact of the matter is that the contrivance was intended to be an emergency exit and nothing else. The spring by which the mechanism is operated can't be reached by a man approaching the room by way of the tunnel. But that," with a grin which wrinkled his whole face, "does not exclude the possibility of a man getting through by the use of force. For instance, the frame could be budged by prying."

"Perhaps. As matters stand, the whole question hinges on whether the room can be entered from the tunnel. If it can't, then it is certain that Pinto committed the murder. If it can, there is a possibility that someone else did it, though the preponderance of evidence still points in Pinto's direction, for it is extremely unlikely that the murderer was aware of the existence of the tunnel. However——"

He checked himself, deciding to let the thought remain unspoken. The anthropologist, having recovered from his temporary embarrassment, gave a hearty laugh.

"You are incorrigible, my friend. You are willing to admit almost any theory but the plain and obvious one, which is that the Gray Phantom committed the murder. Reminds me of Pinel's excellent treatise on the psychology of the criminal. But you must be tired. Please excuse me while I make a telephone call."

The Phantom regarded him narrowly as he trundled from the room and closed the door behind him. The doctor intrigued and baffled him. He was almost certain that Bimble had been guilty of equivocation in regard to the tunnel and the revolving frame. On the other hand, this and other peculiarities might be due to an erratic temperament. His stubborn insistence on the Phantom's guilt could be the result of mental laziness and a disinclination to exert himself over a case which did not interest him. Yet, after making all due allowances, the Phantom could not feel wholly at ease.

The doctor, smiling placidly and without a sign of guile in his face, interrupted his reflections.

"I've just had my friend Inspector Wadhane on the wire," he announced. "It has been decided to let the prisoner sleep off the effects of his debauch.

He will not be questioned until along toward morning. So, my friend, you can sleep in peace. Shall I show you to your room?"

The Phantom, blinking his eyes drowsily, expressed a desire to retire at once. Doctor Bimble conducted him to a pleasant bedroom with two large windows facing the street, saw that everything was in order, and wished his guest a hearty good night. Even before he was out of the room the Phantom had started to remove his clothes.

Yet, no sooner had the door closed than he hurried back into the garments. Though only a few moments ago he had showed signs of great drowsiness, he was now fully awake, and his springy motions and the twinkle in his eyes hinted that sleep was farthest from his mind.

CHAPTER X

IN THE TUNNEL

THE Phantom waited for fifteen minutes, then he quietly opened the door and looked down the hall. The lights were turned low and not a sound broke the stillness. Apparently the anthropologist and the manservant had retired. Stepping inside the room, he took from an inside pocket the little metal box he always carried, examined the snugly packed tools it contained, and made sure that each was in good condition. Finally, he switched off the light, noiselessly closed the door behind him, and tiptoed down the stairs.

Stealing down a corridor through the main part of the house, he reached the extension formed by the laboratory. He stopped at the door, tilted his ear to the keyhole, and listened carefully. It had occurred to him that Doctor Bimble might be at work, and an encounter with his host would have proved embarrassing. His keen ears detected no sounds, however, and in another moment he had passed through the door and was groping his way across the floor of the laboratory.

Of a sudden he stopped. A faint sound seemed to come from the direction where the skeletons stood in their glass-framed cages. He strained his ears to catch a repetition, but none came. Evidently he had been mistaken. He knew how sounds are magnified at night, and what he had heard was probably noth-

ing but the rattling of a windowpane or the creaking of a board under his foot. He proceeded to the opposite wall, darting swift glances to left and right, as if half suspecting that someone was lurking in the shadows. Again a door swung noiselessly on its hinges, and the Phantom glided down the stairs leading to the cellar. From his hip pocket he took a small electric flash and let its beam play over the floor while he looked for the entrance to the tunnel.

For a time he searched in vain, traversing the length of the murky brick walls and carefully scanning each square foot of space without finding a trace of the opening. The mouth of the passage seemed to have disappeared in the three or four hours that had passed since he emerged from the subterranean tube. He tried to locate it by tracing backward the course he had followed in reaching the stairs, but it proved a difficult task, for he had floundered about in total darkness, not daring to use his flash for fear of attracting attention. He had a hazy impression, however, that the opening was in a diagonal line with the foot of the stairway.

The gleam of his flash leaped over the grimy bricks, and presently he detected a narrow fissure in the wall. It extended in a quadrangular course and was barely wide enough to admit a match or a nail. Inserting one of the sharp-nosed tools from his metal case, he pried outward, and a narrow portion of the wall swung open. He saw now that the little fissures constituted the boundaries of a door. It was composed of bricks threaded on iron rods and resembling in color and general appearance those in the surrounding wall, and it was so deftly concealed that only a careful search would reveal its existence. Evidently it had stood open when the Phantom crawled out of the tunnel, which explained why he

had not noticed it. He suspected that the thoughtful anthropologist, not caring to have too many outsiders discover the tunnel, had closed it while the officers were searching the front of the house.

The Phantom waited for a few minutes while a little of the dank air in the cellar found its way into the passage. He did not relish the task ahead of him, but he was determined to settle a point on which the doctor had been singularly evasive. The problem he had set out to solve would be simplified to a great extent, and he would save himself needless efforts and loss of valuable time by ascertaining whether the bedchamber of the late Sylvanus Gage could be entered by way of the tunnel.

Having buttoned his coat tightly and made certain that his instrument case was within easy reach, he inserted head and shoulders in the opening and began the weary crawl toward the other end. His progress was painfully slow, and the smell of the moist earth gave him a sense of oppression which he found hard to shake off. The air, dank and insufficient, was almost stifling, and the walls of the narrow passage, bruising his body at each twist and turn, seemed to exude a sepulchral atmosphere that insinuated itself into body and mind.

At length he reached the point where the tunnel slanted upward into the wall, and here his progress became even more difficult. Time and again he slipped, and he could maintain a footing only by bracing the tips of his shoes against rough spots along the sides. He was puffing from exertion when finally he struck a solid obstruction which told him he had reached the end of the passage.

Finding a precarious foothold, he took out his flash and closely scrutinized his surroundings. On two sides were walls of brick, while directly in front

of him was the flank of the window frame. He pushed against the latter with all his strength, but it presented a firm and solid resistance to his efforts. Next he went over it inch by inch, looking for a hidden lever or spring, but the most careful search revealed nothing that suggested a means of operating the mechanism. Finally he took out one of his tools and, inserting it in the tiny rift between the wall and the edge of the frame, began to pry steadily. After several minutes of constant effort he gave up the task as hopeless.

He leaned back against the wall and bent the full force of his wits to the task of finding a way through the obstruction. Evidently there was none. He had tapped every inch of the surface and looked everywhere for a concealed knob or wire by which the mechanism might be operated. A larger and heavier tool than the instrument in his metal case would have been of no avail, for in those narrow quarters he could not have obtained leverage. His search, though thorough and infinitely painstaking, had netted nothing.

The conclusion was clear. The revolving door could not be operated from the outside; hence the murderer of Sylvanus Gage could not have entered the room through the tunnel. Again the Phantom's mind reverted to the inevitable deduction that no one but Officer Pinto could have committed the crime.

His lungs, which had been straining for air for the last quarter of an hour, felt as though they were on the point of bursting, and he was about to release his foothold and start back through the tunnel when a faint tapping sound caught his ears. He could not tell how long it had been going on, for until now his whole attention had been focused on the problem before him. For all he knew it might just have be-

gun, or it might have started long before he entered the tunnel.

He pressed his ear against the side of the frame and listened. The sounds, quick and sharp, were coming in rapid succession, and at first he wondered whether someone was trying to attract his attention. Then he noticed that the sounds skipped and jumped, as if the tapping covered a considerable area, and his next surmise was that the person on the other side was making a systematic search for something.

"For what?" he wondered; and in the next moment the answer flashed through his mind. He remembered how, while he was imprisoned in the bedroom, momentarily expecting the police to force the door and pounce upon him, he had looked to the window as the only possible means of escape, and how finally he had discovered the nail that proved his salvation. Evidently the person on the other side was now doing the very thing the Phantom himself had been doing a few hours ago.

But who could it be? As far as he knew, no one but Helen, Doctor Bimble and himself was aware of the existence of the revolving door, and the tunnel. It did not seem likely that anyone should be searching at random for an opening. And who could be prowling about the Gage house at such an hour? Again he put his ear to the frame. The tapping had ceased, but now he heard another and different sound that caused him to quiver with excitement. A slight metallic noise, like that produced by the contact of two objects of steel, told him that the person on the inside had found the nail.

In a twinkling he had forgotten his cramped position, the dank air and the sickening smell of moist earth. All his senses were centered on the sounds coming from the other side, so slight that his keen

ears could scarcely detect them. Something told him that in a few minutes he would make a discovery of tremendous importance in relation to the Gage murder mystery. Everything depended upon whether the person on the other side would give the nail the proper twist.

Minutes dragged by on leaden feet. The Phantom felt his heart pound chokingly against his ribs, its loud beats almost drowning the slight metallic sounds coming from the other side. After what seemed hours of nerve-racking suspense, a sharp and sudden click caused him to start violently, and he almost lost his insecure footing.

Then the window frame began to turn. A glare of light struck his eyes as the opening wedge widened. With great, eager gulps he drank in the air coming from the aperture. A minute passed, and then a face, strained and ashen, was thrust into the opening.

It was Mrs. Trippe, the housekeeper. For an instant she stared into the Phantom's startled eyes.

"He's killing me!" she cried. "He's afraid I'll tell! He locked me in——"

She jerked her head to one side. Slight though she was, she almost filled the narrow opening, and he could see only a small strip of the room at her back. Suddenly a shiver coursed down her spine. A hand was projected beyond the wall, and he caught a glimpse of steel flashing in the light. Then, in quick succession, came a scream and a thud, and the woman slid from the window sill.

It had happened so quickly that the Phantom had not time to utter a word or raise a hand. Now, before he could move a muscle, the window frame slammed shut. He heard a click, signifying that the frame was caught in the steel clutches of the mechanism. He pressed his shoulders against it, but to

no avail, and he knew from his previous attempt that the effort was useless. Filled with horror at what he had just seen, he slid down the incline between the walls and began to work back toward the cellar.

Finally, after endless jerks and twistings, he reached the end of the tunnel—and there a fresh shock awaited him. His feet brought up against a solid obstruction. Shove against it as he might, the little door would not yield to his frenzied pressure. For a little he laid still on his back, thinking. His mind was heavy and his thoughts flitted about in circles, but finally it came to him that while he was at the other end of the tunnel someone must have placed a heavy weight against the door.

He was trapped.

CHAPTER XI

A BLOW FROM BEHIND

ONLY one thought stood out clearly in the Phantom's mind as he lay on his back in the tunnel breathing the suffocating fumes of the damp earth, and surrounded by a silence and a darkness so profound that he felt as if a vast void was separating him from the world of the living. His senses were numbed and his brain had ceased to function, but somehow his mind grasped the realization that this was the end of the Gray Phantom's career.

The fate awaiting him seemed as inexorable as the darkness that surrounded him. He had faced great dangers and had found himself in fearful predicaments before, but never had death appeared as certain and inevitable as now. Through his dazed consciousness filtered a resolution to meet death, even in this hideous form, with the same unconcern and stoicism with which he had accepted the favors destiny had strewn in his path. The thought brought a feeble smile to his lips, and he hoped the end would come before the thought faded away. He wanted the world in general and Helen Hardwick in particular to know he had died smiling.

Something, he did not know what, stirred faintly in his mind. Instinctively his thoughts groped for a memory that seemed dim and far away, a memory that caused his body to vibrate with a reawakening desire to live. Slowly, out of the whirling chaos in

his mind, it came to him. He could not—must not —die! He could not pass out into oblivion with a foul crime staining his name. He must live in order to revive and vindicate the faith Helen Hardwick had once reposed in him.

The resolve buoyed him a little, causing his body to throb with a renascent life impulse. Already his mind felt a little clearer, and his nerves and sinews were beginning to respond to the driving force of his will. If his parched lungs could only get a little air!

Again he placed his feet against the door and pushed with all the strength he could summon. He might as well have tried to dislodge a mountain. The implements in his pocket case had helped him out of many a tight dilemma in the past, but they were of no avail now. He still had the pistol he had taken from Helen's hand while they stood in the closet, and for an instant it occurred to him that the report of a shot might penetrate the roof of the tunnel and bring him assistance. A moment later he reconsidered bitterly. If the shot were heard, it would more likely bring the police; besides, the fumes released by the explosion might smother him to death in a few minutes.

With a great effort he crawled away from the door thinking the air might be not so stifling toward the center of the tunnel. He moved only two or three paces when the terrific pounding of his heart and the protest of his tortured lungs forced him to lie still and rest. For several minutes he lay motionless, save for the heaving of his chest, matching his wits against the hardest problem he had ever faced.

Of a sudden something chill and wet fell upon his face. It was a mere drop of moisture, but it felt like ice to his parched skin, causing every nerve to quiver. The contact acted like an electric stimulant on his

mind. He lay rigid, expectant, wondering why the trivial occurrence should affect him so strangely, and presently another drop of moisture splashed against his forehead, sending an icy shiver down his spine.

Suddenly he jerked up his head, striking it against the roof of the tunnel. In a twinkling he had grasped the significance of the dropping moisture. There must be a leak in the vault of the passage, and the soil above was probably soft and porous, enabling the tiny globules of water to percolate.

The deduction jolted the last remnant of stupor out of his body. He was still weak, but the play of his wits kindled his nervous energy. He ran his hand along the roof, locating the point where the moisture was seeping through. The arched vault was supported by boards running in a longitudinal direction and braced at intervals by diagonal props. He gave a hoarse shout of elation as he noticed that the boards were rotting from infiltration of moisture.

He had forgotten the agonized straining of his lungs for air. His exploring fingers found a point where the ends of two boards came together. Taking a tool from the metal case, he inserted it in the joint and pried. After a few vigorous wrenches the board bent downward. Now he gripped its edges with his fingers and, lifting himself from the floor of the tunnel, forced it down by the sheer weight of his body. It snapped, and he pushed it down the passage, then attacked the next board. It gave more easily than the first, and now he began to claw and scratch his way through the damp earth. Remembering the length of the incline at the farther end of the passage, he judged that the layer of soil could not be more than four or five feet deep.

More than once he felt on the point of utter exhaustion, but the prospect of ultimate release fortified

him. Clump after clump of dirt fell at his feet, and now and then he struck a stratum of gravelly soil that yielded more easily to his efforts. From time to time he had to stop digging and brush aside the accumulation at his feet. A wall of dirt was gradually forming on each side of him, cutting down the scant supply of humid air that had so far sustained him, but he kept at his work with the frenzied persistence of one battling for his life. There was a dull roaring in his head and a burning torment in his lungs, and there came moments of despair when he wondered whether his strength would last until he had clawed through the remaining layer of earth.

Then, after what seemed hours of agonizing toil, a cascade of small stones and loose dirt tumbled down over his head and shoulders. Momentarily blinded, he could scarcely realize that his hand had thrust through the obstruction and was now clutching at empty air.

The supense over, he felt suddenly limp and shaky. His legs doubled up under him and he sank back against the wall of the tunnel, greedily sucking in the fresh air that poured down through the opening. For a time he was content to do nothing but rest his racked limbs and drink in huge lungfuls of air.

Through the rift overhead he caught a glimpse of leaden sky. A myriad of strident noises told that the city was awakening. The discordant sounds were like jubilant music in his ears, for a while ago he had thought he would never see the light of another day. After his terrifying experience in the subterranean passage it was hard to realize that he was again one of the living. He struggled to his feet, lurched dizzily hither and thither, and rubbed the dirt out of his eyes. Then, steadying himself with one hand, he cautiously pushed his head through the opening.

No one being in sight, he scrambled to the surface.

He stood in the center of the narrow space between Doctor Bimble's laboratory and the rear of the Gage establishment. On the other sides of the inclosure were a squatty structure that might have been a laundry and a slightly taller building that, judging from the barrels and boxes piled against the wall, was probably a grocery. Evidently the stores and shops had not yet opened, for there was no sign of life in either direction.

The Phantom took a few steps forward, then stopped abruptly, his eyes fixed on the small window in the rear of the cigar store. A recollection sent a shiver through his body. He remembered the hand that had appeared so suddenly in the narrow opening, the swift, murderous stroke and the groan that had died so quickly. There was an air of peace and tranquillity about the building that struck him as weirdly incongruous, in view of the scene that had been enacted within.

He was about to turn away when a quick, light step sounded behind him. Before he could move, two sinewy hands had gripped him about the throat, forcing him down. He tried to resist, but he was still too weak to exert much physical effort. A sickeningly sweetish smell assailed his nostrils, he felt his body grow limp, there was a roaring in his head that sounded like a distant waterfall, and then he had a sensation of sinking—sinking.

CHAPTER XII

THE PHANTOM HAS AN INSPIRATION

"REMARKABLE, sir; most remarkable! May I feel your pulse?"

The Gray Phantom knew, even before he opened his eyes, that the speaker was Doctor Tyson Bimble. He was lying in bed, undressed, in the same room his host had assigned him the night before. The lights were on, so he must have slept through the day, and he felt correspondingly refreshed.

The anthropologist, sitting in a chair beside the bed, was timing his pulse beats. The doctor's thin legs were wrapped in the same tight trousers he had worn on their first meeting, and an acid-stained coat was tightly buttoned across his plump stomach.

"Normal," he declared admiringly, pocketing his watch. "You possess extraordinary recuperative powers, my friend. What a constitution!"

The Phantom's lips tightened. Scraps of recollection were coming to him. He gazed narrowly into the doctor's guileless face.

"A little chloroform goes a long way even with a constitution like mine," he remarked pointedly.

"Ah, but you were utterly exhausted, my friend. Otherwise my excellent Jerome would not have had quite such an easy time with you. A little strong-arm play and a whiff or two of chloroform were all that was necessary. The effect soon wore off, and you lapsed into a natural and invigorating sleep."

"So, it was Jerome. I guessed as much." The Phantom looked perplexedly at the doctor. "But wasn't it a rather rough way of putting a man to bed?"

"It was the only safe way of dealing with an impulsive and strong-headed man like you. But for the timely appearance of my admirable Jerome, you would undoubtedly have walked straight into the arms of the police."

The argument sounded plausible enough. The Phantom realized that the reaction following his escape from the tunnel might have caused him to do several foolish things.

An astute grin creased the doctor's face. "Even the Gray Phantom is at times very transparent. Last night, when you started removing your clothes in my presence, I knew that you had no intention of going to bed. However, I reasoned that you were an intelligent man and could be trusted to take care of yourself. I woke up at an early hour this morning and stepped to your door. You had not returned. Greatly alarmed, I told Jerome to look for you. The estimable fellow found you shortly after you had dug your way out of the tunnel. You ought to feel deeply indebted to him, sir."

"I do," with a faint trace of sarcasm. "But I should like to wring the neck of the practical joker who blockaded this end of the passage while I was at the other."

The words were no sooner spoken than the doctor's face underwent a startling transformation. The affable smile vanished, giving way to a look of such violent wrath that even the Phantom felt a little awed.

"The hound shall get his just deserts, sir," declared the doctor in snarling tones. Then, as if

regretting his display of temper, he laughed easily. "Provided, of course, we learn who perpetrated the outrage."

Again the Phantom was puzzled. He was certain the anthropologist's ferocious outburst had been genuine. It had been far too real and convincing to be feigned even by a clever actor. Yet he sensed a contradiction. Whoever was responsible for the blockaded door must have traversed the doctor's house on his way to the cellar. It did not seem likely that strangers could be taking such liberties in a private residence without the knowledge of its occupant.

"I really ought to have new locks put on the doors," observed Bimble, addressing himself rather than his guest. "That collection of mine is too valuable to be left unprotected."

It sounded convincing, and the casual tone went a long way toward quieting the Phantom's misgivings. He knew that an unduly suspicious nature is as bad as a gullible one. Hadn't he been too prone to put the wrong construction on the eccentricities of a scientist? Everything considered, the doctor's actions had certainly been friendly. Had his intentions been hostile, he could easily have turned his guest over to the police.

The Phantom shifted the subject. "Well, at any rate, I proved to my satisfaction that Gage's bedchamber can't be entered by way of the tunnel."

The twinkle behind the lenses expressed doubt and amusement. "And so you have convinced yourself that Pinto committed the murder?"

"That nobody else could have committed it," corrected the Phantom.

"Which means precisely the same thing. Even if we grant that you are being frank with me—which

I strongly doubt, by the way—you seem to have a passion for drawing obvious inferences. From the fact that you were unable to operate the mechanism from the outside you deduce that the murderer could not have entered the room via the tunnel. That, my friend, is very superficial reasoning. For instance, Gage himself might have admitted the murderer through the revolving frame."

The Phantom's brows went up. The possibility suggested by the doctor had not occurred to him. The next moment he grinned at the sheer preposterousness of the idea. "But few men are obliging enough to welcome their murderers with open arms."

"Not if they come as murderers." The doctor gave him a keen, searching look. "But suppose they come in the guise of friends? That's only a random suggestion, but you will admit the possibility exists." He shrugged his shoulders, as if to dismiss the subject. "Jerome has repaired the damage you wrought in the tunnel last night, covering up all traces of your little adventure, so there is no danger of the police tracing you here."

"Thoughtful," murmured the Phantom a little absently.

"Which reminds me," added the anthropologist, "that you are again a hunted man. The police have seen their mistake and the prisoner was released this morning. He bears a superficial resemblance to you, but comparison of his finger prints with those of the Gray Phantom proved conclusively he was not the man they wanted, and he seems to have given a satisfactory account of himself in every way."

"What else?" asked the Phantom, deeply interested.

Doctor Bimble laughed merrily. "Every newspaper in town is poking fun at the stupid police—and

well they might. The prisoner proved to be a reporter employed by the *Sphere,* whose only offense is an inclination to forget that these are dry times. A reporter, of all persons! It's delicious!"

"A reporter—on the *Sphere!*" echoed the Phantom, sensing a possible significance in the combination. "Not, by any chance, the one who reported the Gage murder?"

"The same. That's what lends an extra touch of humor to the silly blunder. Imagine a journalist, confronted with a scarcity of news, going out and committing a murder in order to have something to write about!"

The Phantom joined in the doctor's laughter, but his face sobered quickly. "Is this unfortunate journalist wearing a beard?"

"No; but I understand your photograph in the rogues' gallery shows you smooth shaven, so the absence of a beard really enhances the resemblance to the pictures published."

The Phantom was silent for a time. There was a hint of deep thought in the lines around his eyes. His hand passed slowly across his beard, still gritty and tangled from his experience in the tunnel. Suddenly the muscles of his face twitched.

"Anything else in the papers, doctor?"

"Only the usual silly doings of a silly world."

"I mean in connection with the murder. No new developments?"

"None whatever, except that the search for the Gray Phantom has been renewed with increased vigor. There is an interview with the police commissioner, in which that optimistic soul declares the rascal cannot have left New York and that he will surely be captured within the next few hours."

The Phantom smiled amusedly, but there was a

fog in his mind. Was it possible no one had yet discovered that a second murder had been perpetrated in the Sylvanus Gage house? With his own eyes the Phantom had seen the housekeeper's face fade into the ashen hue of death, and it seemed incredible that the body had not been found.

"By the way," remarked Doctor Bimble, as if carrying out the other's train of thought, "I wonder what has become of Gage's housekeeper. I walked over there this morning to see if I could do anything for the poor lady. The front door was unlocked, but Mrs. Trippe wasn't about."

It required a little effort on the Phantom's part to keep his voice steady. "H'm. She has had quite a shock. Perhaps she is lying ill and helpless in some part of the house."

"The same thing occurred to me, and so I looked in every room in the house. The lady was nowhere in sight, however. Naturally she found it unpleasant to live alone in the place after the murder. She may have gone away for a visit."

"Yes, quite likely." It was on the Phantom's tongue to tell what he had seen, but for a reason not quite clear to himself he desisted. Doctor Bimble's revelation was somewhat staggering, and the disappearance of the housekeeper's body was a poser that baffled the Phantom's astuteness. The mystery seemed to grow more tangled and intricate with every passing hour, and he felt that, so far, his progress had been dishearteningly slow. Yet, with the whole city and its environs converted into a vast man trap, what could he do?

"Dear me!" The anthropologist jumped up with the abruptness of a rabbit. "I sit here babbling like a garrulous old woman while you must be famishing. I shall have Jerome bring you some food at once. I

suppose," stopping on his way to the door and regarding the Phantom with a serio-comic expression, "it isn't necessary to warn you that it would be unwise to go out on the streets a night like this."

A grin masked the Phantom's searching look. "You seem deeply concerned in my welfare, doctor."

"Naturally." Bimble drew himself up. "With me a bargain is always a bargain. I hope you haven't forgotten our understanding."

"I see," the Gray Phantom replied. "You want my skeleton to come to you intact. Yes, doctor, I'm aware of the inclemency of the weather. You needn't worry on my account."

The doctor tarried a moment longer, cleared his throat as if about to say something else, then swung around on his heels and left the room. The Phantom looked about him. On a chair near the bed hung his clothes, neatly brushed and pressed, and on the dresser, laid out in an orderly row, were the contents of his pockets, including pistol, metal case, and watch. The Phantom slipped out of bed and examined the articles. Nothing was missing and nothing had been disturbed. Evidently Doctor Bimble trusted to his guest's good sense to keep him indoors.

And well he might, was the Phantom's grim thought. There were excellent reasons why he should remain under the anthropologist's roof—reasons which only a fool or a desperado would ignore. The police, goaded by ridicule and incensed at the way they had been made game of, were undoubtedly exerting every effort and using every trick and stratagem to ensnare their quarry. There were pitfalls at every crossing, traps in every block, prying eyes in a thousand places. To defy such dangers would be sheer madness.

Yet there were equally urgent reasons why the Phantom should not remain idle. One of them, and the most potent of them all, had to do with Helen Hardwick. Another was the Phantom's irrepressible passion for flinging his gauntlet in the face of danger. A third was the firm conviction that he could rely on his mental and physical agility to see him through, no matter what hazards he might encounter.

He sprang back into bed as a noise sounded at the door. The cat-footed and tight-lipped manservant entered with a folding table, a stack of newspapers, and a trayful of steaming dishes. The Phantom watched the nimble play of his long, prehensile fingers as he set the table.

"You're quite a scrapper, Jerome," he observed good-naturedly.

"Yes, sir." The man's gloomy face was unreadable.

"You didn't give me much of a chance to use my fists on you."

"No, sir."

The Phantom attacked the hot and savory soup. "Pugilistic and culinary talents are a rare combination, Jerome."

"Yes, sir."

"But you are not very much of a conversationalist."

"No, sir."

The man, standing with his back to the wall, apparently immovable save when he unbent to pass a dish or replenish the water tumbler, piqued the Phantom's curiosity. A grenadier turned to stone while standing at attention could not be more rigid and impassive than Jerome, yet there was a hint of constant alertness about the dull eyes and the lines at the corners of his mouth.

"There are moments when silence is golden," observed the Phantom. "Perhaps this is one of them."

"Perhaps, sir."

The Phantom finished the meal in silence. When Jerome had gone, he turned to the newspapers, noticing that the front pages were largely given over to himself. His own photograph was published side by side with that of the *Sphere* reporter, whose name appeared to be Thomas Granger. Many thousands of dollars were being wagered on the outcome of the contest between the Phantom and the police, with the odds slightly in favor of the latter. A yellow journal was offering prizes to those of its readers who furnished the best suggestions for the capture of the famous outlaw. There were interviews with leading citizens in all walks of life, expressing amazement and indignation over the murder of Sylvanus Gage and the dilatory tactics of the officials. Even Wall Street was disturbed, for who knew but what the celebrated rogue was planning another of the stupendous raids that had rocked the financial world on two or three occasions in the past?

The Phantom was amused, but also a trifle perturbed. The handicaps he had to overcome if he were to accomplish his purpose were rather staggering. But for the eccentric anthropologist's hospitality he might even now be in the coils of the police. There was a troubled gleam in his eyes as he tossed the papers aside. For several minutes he sat on the edge of the bed, a thoughtful pucker between his eyes, abstractedly gazing down at the papers on the floor.

Of a sudden he roused himself out of a brown study. While his thoughts had been far away, his eyes had been steadily fixed on the two photographs in the center of the page spread out at his feet. Now

a steely glitter appeared in his narrowing eyes and a smile spread slowly from the corners of his lips.

In an instant he was on his feet, glancing at his watch. It was almost ten o'clock. He hurried quietly to the door, listened at the keyhole for a few moments, then shot the bolt. From now on his movements were characterized by the brisk precision of one acting on an inspiration. Taking a sharp-edged tool from his pocket case, he stepped to the wash stand and mixed some lather. A few deft strokes and slashes, and his beard was gone. Since Patrolman Pinto had recognized him in spite of it, the beard was no longer useful, and the reddish and bristly mustache which he took from a wrapper in his metal case and affixed to his lips would serve fairly well as a temporary disguise. After a brief glance in the mirror, he put on his clothes and pocketed the articles on the dresser.

The Gray Phantom was ready for one of the maddest and most perilous enterprises of his career.

CHAPTER XIII

KIDNAPED

SOMEWHERE a clock was striking ten as the Phantom withdrew the bolt and, silent as a cat, stepped out into the hall. He leaned over the balustrade and looked down. From the rear came an occasional tinkle of glassware. Doctor Bimble, never dreaming that his guest was foolhardy enough to leave his secure retreat a second time, was evidently at work in his laboratory. Noiselessly the Phantom stole down the stairs, carefully testing each step before he intrusted his weight to it. The door opened without a sound, and he darted a quick glance up and down the street.

A fine drizzle was falling and the sidewalks glistened in the lights from the street lamps and windows. There was a thin sprinkling of pedestrians in the thoroughfare. Outside a pool room across the street stood a group of loafers, and a band of gospel workers was addressing an apathetic crowd on the nearest corner. The Phantom was about to step away from the door when he saw something that caused him to press close to the wall.

"Our friend Pinto," he mused as a thickset figure jogged past. "Seems a bit distracted this evening. Wonder what's up."

The policeman passed on with only a perfunctory glance in the Phantom's direction. There was something about his gait and the way he swung his baton

which suggested that his mind was not quite at ease. The Phantom waited until he had turned the corner, then crept out of the doorway, assuming an easy, swinging gait as he struck the sidewalk and turned west.

The streets had their usual humdrum appearance, but beneath the calm on the surface he sensed a tension and an air of repressed activity. It might have been only imagination, but he thought people were regarding each other with covert suspicion, as if friends and neighbors were no longer to be trusted. The Phantom sauntering along as if he had not a care in the world, turned into the Bowery and proceeded toward the nearest station of the elevated railway. No taxicabs were in sight, but he would be comparatively safe once he was aboard a train.

He whistled a merry little tune, but he was uncomfortably aware that the cut and quality of his clothes were attracting attention in that squalid neighborhood. Now he was only a few paces from the elevated stairs. The space immediately in front of him was brightly illuminated by a corner light, and each forward step was taken at great risk. He advanced with an air of unconcern, glanced languidly at the papers and magazines spread out on the news stall, and in another moment he would have been starting up the stairs.

Just then he felt the sharp scrutiny of a pair of eyes. Their owner, he fancied, was stationed in the dark doorway of an abandoned corner saloon, only a few steps from the foot of the stairway, but he dared not look back or sideways. In a second he had rallied his wits to the emergency. To show the slightest nervousness or seem in a hurry would instantly provoke a sharp command to halt. He purchased a newspaper, glanced disdainfully at the head-

lines on the first page, and was chuckling over a cartoon on the sporting page as he leisurely began to ascend the stairs.

A loud rumbling told that a train was approaching. The Phantom pursued his unhurried pace, conscious that the owner of the prying eyes had stepped out of the doorway and was regarding him suspiciously. Suddenly, as he reached a turn in the stairs, a cry rang out:

"Stop!"

The Phantom looked down with an air of idle curiosity, as if it were unthinkable that the command could be meant for him, and climbed on. He had almost reached the top when a second and more insistent cry sounded.

"Hey, there! I mean *you!*"

The Phantom climbed the remaining steps, reaching the ticket window just as a train roared into the station. Three sharp taps sounded against the sidewalk below, followed by a shrill blast of a police whistle. The Phantom dropped his ticket in the chopper and stepped out on the platform. The train gates were open and a few passengers were getting aboard. For a moment he hesitated; then he hurried swiftly to the end of the deserted platform and leaped out on the narrow walk used by track workers.

The train rolled out of the station. The Phantom, lying flat, guessed that the agent at the next stop had already been notified to hold it for search, and it was this circumstance that had decided him against getting aboard. From the street rose a great hubbub. He began to crawl along the narrow span, screened from sight by a heavy beam. Each moment was precious now, for soon the police would learn that the Phantom was not on the train, and

then they would guess that he was hiding somewhere on the platform or the track.

He had crawled the length of half a block when he stopped and looked down. The commotion at the corner had ceased, but as he glanced behind him he saw that several dark forms were moving rapidly across the platform, as if looking for someone. At the point where he lay the street was dimly lighted and almost deserted. Agilely he swung his body from the walk, clutched the beam with both hands until he could obtain a foothold along one of the heavy iron pillars that supported the structure, then slid quickly to the ground. Standing in the shadow of the pillar, he looked about him. Apparently he had not been seen, but in a few moments a dragnet would be thrown around the vicinity, and he would have to exercise the utmost speed and caution if he was to escape.

Quickly he dodged into a side street. On the corner was a patrol box, and, even as he glanced at it, the bulb at the top of the pole flashed into a green brilliance. He knew what the signal meant. A general alarm had been sent out, spreading the news that the Gray Phantom had been seen. He hurried on, but he had not reached far when a patrolman appeared around the opposite corner, forcing him to take refuge in a dark cellarway. Luckily the green light had already attracted the policeman's attention, and he hurried past the point where the Phantom was hidden, and made for the box on the corner. While the bluecoat was receiving his instructions from the station house the Phantom crawled out of his retreat and, clinging close to the shadows along the walls, hastened in the other direction.

He was very cautious now. Once out of the immediate neighborhood, the greatest danger would

be past, but for the present every step of the way bristled with perils. A taxicab hove into sight as he reached an intersection of streets, but the chauffeur showed no inclination to heed his signal. The Phantom placed himself directly in the path of the onrushing vehicle. It stopped with a grinding of brakes, accompanied with a medley of oaths.

"What d'ye mean?" demanded the chauffeur. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

"Double fare," suggested the Phantom temptingly.

A sharp glance shot out from beneath the visor of the driver's cap. "Where to?"

"South Ferry," said the Phantom, though his actual destination was a good distance short of that point.

"All right," with a shrewd glance at his fare. "Get in."

He held the door open and the Phantom entered the cab. They had proceeded only a short distance, however, when the passenger pinned a bill to the cushion, cautiously stepped out on to the running board and hopped off in the middle of a dark block. He had not quite approved of the chauffeur's looks.

Just ahead of him lay the wholesale section of Broadway, at that time of night as gloomy and lifeless a stretch of thoroughfare as can be found in all New York. The Phantom walked briskly to the corner and was turning south when he all but collided with a red-faced heavy-jowled policeman.

"Pardon," he said lightly. Quickly he stuck a cigar between his lips, tugging at his mustache with one hand and exploring his vest pocket with the other. "By the way, officer, happen to have a match?"

The officer produced the desired article, and in

return the Phantom proffered a cigar while he lighted his own. With a hearty "Thank you, sor," the policeman put the weed in his pocket and trudged on, deciding he would smoke the affable stranger's cigar when he went off duty. He didn't, however. After straightening out certain tangles in his mind and arriving at certain conclusions, Officer McCloskey resolved to keep the cigar as a souvenir of the occasion when he accommodated the Gray Phantom with a match.

Chuckling at the happy circumstances that some policemen are more gullible than others, the Phantom hurried forward in the shadows of tall brick buildings. He thought he had left the zone of greatest danger behind him, but the utmost caution was still needed; the crucial test would not come until he reached his destination. As often before, he was relying for success and safety on the fact that he was doing the very thing a hunted man was least likely to do.

A hansom drawn by a scraggy nag came toward him and drew up at the curb on his signal. He fixed an appraising look on the driver, a despondent-looking individual in sadly dilapidated livery, whose sole concern in his prospective passenger seemed to have to do with the collecting of a generous fare.

"Drive me to the *Sphere* office," directed the Phantom, satisfied with his inspection of the man on the box.

He climbed in, and a crack of the whip startled the nag into activity. The Phantom, tingling with a familiar sensation, leaned back against the cushion and watched long rows of somber buildings stream past. He was bent on a madcap adventure, and the details of his plan were still vague, but if the scheme succeeded he would have gained an important ad-

vantage. His task, besides being difficult and dangerous, was also somewhat strange to him. Many sensational ventures embellished his past, but he had never until now essayed a kidnaping, at least not under circumstances like these.

The vista brightened. A short distance ahead loomed the Municipal Building and the Woolworth Tower. Serenely the cab jogged into City Hall Park, carrying its passenger into a brightly lighted square that even at night stirred with activity and bristled with a thousand dangers. The hansom stopped, and the Phantom gazed a trifle dubiously at a tall building from which issued the clatter of linotype machines and the dull rumble of presses.

"Here we are, sir," observed the jehu expectantly, speaking through the trap over the passenger's head.

The Phantom did not move. The entrance of the *Sphere* building was brightly lighted and people were constantly passing in either direction. On the corner, keenly scanning the face of each passer-by, stood a lordly policeman. The Phantom counted his chances, knowing that much more than his personal freedom was at stake. The mustache, his sole disguise, seemed inadequate. He might be recognized by anyone in the passing throng who chanced to give him a second glance, and he would face another ticklish situation when he was inside the building.

"Didn't you say the *Sphere,* sir?" inquired the driver.

The Phantom was about to reply when fate unexpectedly stepped in and solved his problem. A few vigorous expressions spoken in loud and boisterous tones drew his attention to the doorway. A gaudily garbed person who seemed to be in an advanced stage of inebriation was being propelled through the door by a stocky man with a reddish and

determined face. As he caught a glimpse of the tipsy individual's features, the Phantom started and wedged his figure into the farther corner of the hansom.

From his well-filled wallet he took a bill and thrust it through the trap. The jehu took it, stared for a moment at the numeral in the corner, which was imposing enough to corrupt stancher souls than his, then listened attentively to the instructions his fare was giving in low and hurried tones.

"I get you, sir," was his comment. "Leave it to me."

In the meantime the stout person had given the tipsy one a final departing shove, and now he stood aside, with thumbs crooked in the armpits of his vest, his face glowing with the consciousness of a job well performed. His victim picked himself up with great difficulty and looked about him with groggy eyes while loudly proclaiming how he would avenge the affront.

"Cab, sir?" invitingly inquired the jehu.

The inebriate one careened forward, blinked his eyes and, with head wagging limply from side to side, gave the hansom a slanting look. Evidently it met his approval, for he nodded and staggered closer. The driver jumped from the box and obligingly assisted his new fare to the seat. A moment later the cab was dashing away from the curb, followed by the amused glances of several spectators.

The tipsy passenger, sprawling lumpishly in his seat, rolled a little to one side as the conveyance turned a corner. To his amazement his head struck someone's shoulder; then a firm, low voice spoke in his ear:

"Tommie Granger, you're just the person I have been looking for."

CHAPTER XIV

THOMAS GRANGER

SLOWLY and with difficulty the intoxicated man straightened himself and looked unsteadily at his companion. They were in a dark street and their faces were indistinct.

"Shay," demanded the tipsy one, "thish ish my cab. Get out!"

"Now, Granger," replied the Phantom with a chuckle, "you surely don't mind giving a fellow a lift? By the way, where do you think you are going?"

"Home, but——"

"You forgot to tell the driver your address."

"Dam' the driver! He ought to know enough —hic—to take a fellow home when he's soused. Where elsh would I be going? Huh?"

"But your address——"

"Dam' my address! It's nobody'sh business. I live where I please—see? I'm drunk. I get drunk when—hic—whenever I feel like it. Know where to get the sh-stuff, too. Alwaysh carry a bottle on my hip. Want a drink?"

"Never touch it. Thanks, just the same. What was the matter back at the office? They were treating you rather roughly."

Granger seemed to recall a grievance. He made an effort to draw himself up. "I inshulted the city editor and—hic—he told the watchman to bounce

me. I alwaysh inshult people when I'm soused. Did I ever inshult you?"

"Not yet, Granger."

"Maybe I will shome day. Shay, tell the cabby to turn back. I wanta go back to the offish and clean out that bunch of stiffs."

"Now, Granger——"

"Lemme go! I'll show 'em they can't treat me that way. Lemme go, I tell you! Hey, cabby, reversh the current."

Granger sprang from the seat, lurched against the side of the cab, and would have hurled himself against the pavement had not the Phantom jerked him back. The drunken man lunged out with arms and legs, but he subsided quickly as he felt something hard pressing against his chest.

"Cut out the nonsense!" The Phantom spoke firmly and incisively. "I have you covered, and I won't stand for any foolishness."

The touch of steel against his ribs seemed to have a sobering effect on Granger. For a few moments he stared sulkily at his companion, then he settled himself against the cushion, and his mind appeared to be groping its way out of stupefying fumes. The cab was pursuing a zigzagging route through crooked and dimly lighted streets, the jehu having been instructed to drive at random until he received further orders. The Phantom's mind worked quickly while he pressed the pistol against his captive's chest. A new problem confronted him. He had kidnaped his man, but where was he to take him? The logical answer was Sea-Glimpse, but the trip would consume too much time, to say nothing of the risks involved. Doctor Bimble's house? The Phantom shook his head even as the idea occurred to him. The anthropologist was too erratic a man

to inspire confidence, and the Phantom needed someone whom he could trust absolutely.

Presently he felt Granger's eyes on his face. The cool night air, together with the steady pressure of the pistol, was rapidly driving the alcoholic vapors from the reporter's brain, and now he was subjecting his captor to a blinking, unsteady scrutiny, as if he were just beginning to suspect that something was amiss.

"Is this a pinch?" he asked, his tones still a trifle thick.

The Phantom laughed. "No, Granger. I'm not an officer. Besides, why should I be pinching you?"

"For being drunk and disorderly and carrying a bottle on my hip."

"Those heinous crimes don't interest me. Anyhow, I understand journalists are more or less privileged persons. I am merely taking you to a safe place, where you won't go around insulting people and getting your head smashed."

Granger fell into a moody silence, and the Phantom thought he detected signs of a growing uneasiness about his captive. Evidently the period of depression that follows artificial stimulation was already setting in. Because of the darkness and his befuddled state of mind, the reporter had not yet recognized the man at his side, but his gaze was taking on a keener edge and would soon penetrate the thin disguise afforded by the mustache. The Phantom felt the need of a quick decision.

A clock struck one. In scrupulous obedience to his orders the jehu was urging his nag over the darkest and most dismal streets he could find. The Phantom looked out, and a glance at a corner sign told him that they were crossing Mott Street and were not far from the heart of old Chinatown. A

recollection flashed through his mind, and in its wake came an idea.

"Stop," he called through the trap. The hansom jolted to the curb and halted. The street was silent and the sidewalks, as far as eyes could reach, were deserted. There was a thin, lazy drizzle in the air and the atmosphere was a trifle heavy.

"Listen, Granger," he spoke sharply. "We are getting out here, but I intend to keep you covered every instant. The slightest sound or the least false move will cost you your life. Is that clear?"

The reporter's response was surly, but the Phantom knew that his warning had had the effect he desired. Holding the pistol with one hand, he took out his wallet with the other and selected a bill. Then he stepped down on the curb, ordering the reporter to follow.

"Here, cabby." He extended the bill, which, with the other the Phantom had previously given him, was surely enough to make the jehu forget any little irregularity he might have observed. With a fervent "Thank you, sir," he whipped up the scrawny nag and drove away.

"Now, Granger." The Phantom spoke in low but commanding tones. "My life depends on the success of this little undertaking. I'll shoot you the instant you show the least intention to spoil my plan. Understand?"

Granger nodded, seemingly convinced that he was dealing with a desperate man and that, for the time at least, it behooved him to obey orders and ask no questions. The Phantom wound his arm about the other's back, firmly jabbing the muzzle of the pistol against the fellow's armpit, thus giving the appearance of steadying a slightly incapacitated friend.

They approached the center of Chinatown, keep-

ing in the shadows whenever possible. Granger was sullenly silent, and he seemed to be hoping and watching for a sign of relaxing vigilance on his captor's part. The Phantom understood, and as they left the shelter of darkness and turned the corner at Pell Street, he pressed the pistol a little harder against the reporter's armpit.

A slumberous gloom hung over the district, as if the famous old quarter were brooding over memories of a lurid past, when terror stalked in subterranean crypts and strange scenes were enacted under cover of Oriental splendor. There were a few stragglers in the streets and some of the shops and restaurants were lighted; but, on the whole, the section presented a dull and lifeless appearance. The Phantom scanned the signs and numbers as he hurried along with his captive, keeping the latter close to his side, and constantly on the alert against lurking dangers.

Finally he stopped before one of the smaller establishments and, after descending a few steps, knocked on the basement door. Signs painted across the window in Chinese and English announced that the place was occupied by Peng Yuen, dealer in Oriental goods. Once, years ago, while the district was ripped and rocked by one of its frequent tong wars, the Phantom had chanced to do Peng Yuen a great favor, and the Chinaman had sworn undying gratitude and promised to show his appreciation in a practical way if the opportunity should ever come. A strange friendship had developed, and Peng Yuen, though wily and rascally in his dealings with others, had impressed the Phantom as a man whom he could safely trust.

The front of the store was dark, but through an open door in the rear came a shaft of light. As he

waited, the Phantom threw an uneasy glance up and down the street. Luck had been with him so far, but the tension was beginning to tell on his nerves.

A puny figure crossed the path of light, then the door opened a few inches, and the two arrivals were given a keen, slant-eyed scrutiny. The Phantom knew a little Chinese, and a few words spoken in that tongue had a magic effect on the man inside. With a curious obeisance, he drew back and motioned them to enter. The Phantom, pushing his quarry ahead of him through the door, spoke a few more words in Chinese, and their host pointed invitingly to the door in the rear.

The three entered, and Peng Yuen, arrayed in straw-colored garments embroidered with black bats, shot the bolt. His face was as impassive as that of the image of Kuan-Yin *pu tze* which stood on a shelf over a lacquered teak-wood cabinet, and he was so slight of stature that it seemed as though a puff of wind would have blown him to the land of his ancestors. The air in the little den was heavy with scents of the East.

The light, filtering through shades of green and rose, gave Granger his first clear view of the Phantom's face. With a start he fell back a step and stared at his captor out of gradually widening eyes. The last signs of stupor fled from his face, and a startled cry rose in his throat as the Phantom smilingly snatched the false mustache from his lips.

The Chinaman, standing with arms folded across his chest, viewed the scene with supreme indifference. Granger slowly ran his hand across his forehead, as if wondering whether his senses were playing him tricks. His lips came apart, and a startled gleam appeared in his bleary, heavy-lidded eyes.

"The—the Gray Phantom!" he muttered shakily, wetting his lips and falling back another step.

The Phantom looked amused. "Just think what a scoop you've missed, Granger." He turned to the Chinaman. "Peng, you old heathen, I guess you know they are accusing me of murder?"

"So?" said Peng Yuen in his slow, precise English. "I did not know. I never read the newspapers."

"Then, of course, you are not aware that the police are conducting a lively search for me?"

"My friend," said the Chinaman, unimpressed, "I have told you that I do not read the papers."

The Phantom searched the almond-shaped eyes for a sign of a twinkle, but found none.

"Peng Yuen, you are lying like a gentleman. It grieves me to shatter such beautiful ignorance, but it must be done. I did not commit the murder of which I am accused. For reasons of my own I desire to find the murderer and hand him over to the police. I am seriously handicapped by the interest the authorities are taking in me, which makes it unsafe for me to move a single step. I have thought of a ruse by which that obstacle may be removed."

The Chinaman lifted his brows inquiringly.

"This gentleman," continued the Phantom, indicating the inebriate, "is Mr. Thomas Granger, a reporter on the *Sphere*. As you may have noticed, he looks something like me. The police, deceived by the resemblance, took it into their heads to arrest him. He was able to give a satisfactory account of himself, of course, and his finger prints quickly convinced the authorities they had made a mistake. They are not likely to make that kind of mistake a second time. You follow me, Peng Yuen?"

The ghost of a grin flickered across the China-

man's face. "Your words, my friend, have their roots in eternal wisdom."

"Thanks for that kind thought, Peng Yuen. I knew you would see the point. Granger has seen it, too, though his mind is not functioning with its usual brilliance to-night. He has consented to disappear for a few days and has agreed to let me borrow his identity in the meantime. As the Gray Phantom I can scarcely move a step. In the rôle of Thomas Granger, newspaper reporter, I shall be able to move about unmolested. What, Granger—not backing out of the bargain, I hope?"

A seemingly careless gesture with the pistol, together with a warning look, quickly silenced the protests on Granger's lips. After a few moments of fidgeting and indecision, he accepted the situation with a good-natured grin, as if its humorous side had appealed to him.

"Excellent!" drawled the Phantom. "I knew you would be reasonable. Now we strip."

He handed the pistol to Peng Yuen, placed his metal case on the table, and began to remove his clothes. Granger followed his example, and in a few minutes the two had exchanged garments. The reporter was addicted to vivid hues and extreme designs. At first the Phantom felt a trifle uncomfortable in the strange garb, but he knew it was necessary to the rôle he was assuming. He studied the reporter carefully while he took a number of tubes and vials from his case. Granger was a younger man, his eyes were of a slightly different hue from the Phantom's, and there were other differences which were easily discernible to the keen eye.

The Phantom, viewing himself in a cheval glass, daubed a dark tint over the gray at his temples.

With an occasional backward glance at the reporter, he dappled his cheeks with a faintly chromatic powder, traced a tiny line on each side of the mouth, poured a little oil on his hair and patted it till it lay smooth and sleek against his head, performing each touch with such a delicate skill that, though the resemblance was greatly enhanced, there was scarcely a suggestion of make-up.

"What do you think, Peng Yuen?" he inquired, turning from the cheval glass.

A look of admiration came into the Chinaman's usually woodenlike face. Even the voice was Granger's. The expression around the mouth and the eyes and the characteristic set of the shoulders were adroitly imitated, and already the Phantom had picked up several of the reporter's mannerisms.

"It is good," murmured Peng Yuen, putting the maximum of approval into the minimum of words.

The Phantom was beginning to show signs of restlessness. He glanced at his watch, then fixed the Chinaman with a penetrating look.

"Peng Yuen," he said, "in the good old days there were hiding places on these premises where people could disappear."

"It may be so." The Chinaman's face was expressionless. "I do not recollect."

But even as he spoke, a touch of his fingers produced an opening in the wall. The Phantom motioned, and with a shrug of the shoulders the reporter stepped through the aperture. A moment later a sliding panel had shut him from view.

"The Phantom has disappeared," mumbled the Chinaman. "Except when I bring him food and drink, I will forget that he exists. Going so soon, Mr. Granger?"

The bogus journalist grinned as he gripped Peng Yuen's thin, weazened hand. He squeezed it until the Chinaman winced, then hurried out into the dark, dripping night, turning his steps in the direction of the house on East Houston Street.

CHAPTER XV

A WARNING FROM THE DUKE

THE Phantom walked briskly, with an easy, carefree swagger, breathing freely for the first time since the beginning of the strange events that had attended his efforts to solve the mystery of the Gage murder. In the rôle of an irresponsible journalist with a weakness for strong liquor he could feel reasonably secure, for the police had been so cruelly nagged and ridiculed that they would think twice before repeating their sad blunder.

"Stop!" commanded a voice as he swung into Houston Street. The Phantom halted and smiled impudently into the face of a plain-clothes man who emerged from a dark doorway to look him over.

"Oh, Granger," muttered the officer disgustedly after a glance at his showy attire and a sniff of the whisky with which the Phantom, making use of the reporter's bottle, had prudently scented himself. "Sober for a change, I see. Where do you get the stuff, anyhow?"

"That would be telling. Any news of the Phantom?"

"Naw! We thought we had him a while ago, over at a Third Avenue L station, but he blew away. I s'pose you're out to nab him and get a scoop for that yellow rag of yours."

"Maybe," said the Phantom cheerfully. "It

would be quite an event in my young life. I'll be on my way, if you're sure you don't want to take me to headquarters and get another sample of my finger prints."

"Aw—beat it!" muttered the detective, touched in a sore spot. The Phantom chuckled and moved on. His new rôle promised to be amusing as well as profitable, and the ease with which he had passed the first test gave him added confidence. Twice within the next fifteen minutes he was stopped and questioned, only to be dismissed with a disgusted grunt or a facetious remark.

As he crossed the Bowery a stocky figure in patrolman's uniform appeared around the corner and moved down the street a few paces ahead of him. After studying his gait and bearing for a few moments, the Phantom knew it was Officer Pinto. He slackened his pace and followed, stepping softly so as not to attract the policeman's attention.

Pinto's steps faltered as he approached the middle of the block, and he walked with a shuffling and uncertain air. Finally he stopped, and the Phantom thought he was gazing at a window directly in front of him. He tiptoed a little closer, and now he saw that the building on which the officer's attention was fixed so intently was none other than the murky and silent structure that had been occupied by Gage and his housekeeper.

The policeman drew a little closer to the window, then stood rigid and motionless, as if the building were exerting a peculiar fascination upon him. At that moment the Phantom would have given a great deal to know what was going on in the mind of the man he was watching. He could make a guess, but guesses were unsatisfactory. At length the officer shrugged his shoulders, as if to shake off something

that oppressed him, then tried the lock in matter-of-fact fashion and moved on down the street.

The Phantom hastened after him. He was no longer trying to avoid detection, and his footfalls sounded clear and sharp in the quiet street. The policeman stopped, looked back, and peered sharply at the oncomer.

"Granger—huh!" he snorted after giving the Phantom a derisive once-over. "Say, does your ma know you're out as late as this? Getting all them glad rags mussed up in the rain, too! What's the idea?"

"The Phantom has got my goat," confessed the pseudo reporter. "It isn't natural for a man to pop in and out the way he does without getting caught."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" grumbled the patrolman, resuming his walk.

The Phantom fell into step beside him, now and then casting a sidelong glance at his sour and uncommunicative face. All of a sudden he wondered whether the policeman was aware that a second murder had been committed in the Gage house, and again it struck him as bafflingly strange that no mention had been made of the finding of the housekeeper's body. What had become of it, and how much, if anything, did Pinto know?

"Something seems to be eating you," he observed casually, trying to adopt a phraseology suited to his rôle. "You were staring at that window as if you expected old Gage's ghost to take a stroll. What were you thinking of, Pinto?"

The policeman gave a quick, searching look. "Say, you've been watching me, ain't you? What's the big idea? And how do you know my name?"

The Phantom laughed engagingly. "How touchy we are to-night! I wasn't watching you, exactly.

Just strolling along, hoping to bump into the Phantom and cover myself with glory. Then I saw you, and I couldn't imagine what you were seeing in that window. As for knowing your name, I happen to be aware that the officer on this beat is one Joshua Pinto and that he was called by the housekeeper the night Gage was murdered."

The patrolman, evidently satisfied with the explanation, mumbled something under his breath.

"But you haven't answered my question," persisted the Phantom, speaking in gently teasing tones. "I am still wondering what you were thinking of while standing in front of the window."

"Why, I was—just thinking, that's all."

"How illuminating! I wonder if, by any chance, your profound meditations had anything to do with the present whereabouts of Mrs. Mary Trippe, Gage's housekeeper."

The patrolman came to a dead stop. Of a sudden his face turned almost white and his eyes grew wider and wider as they stared into the questioner's face.

"What — what d'you mean?" he demanded thickly.

The Phantom laughed easily. "Why, Pinto, you're the scaredest cop I ever saw. Your nerves must be in a bad way. I was only wondering if you've seen anything of Mrs. Trippe lately."

"My nerves *are* a bit jumpy," admitted Pinto. He was moving again, but there was evidence of weakness in the region of his knees. "They've been that way ever since I had a touch of indigestion last month. What was it you asked me about Mrs. Trippe?"

"I walked over there yesterday afternoon, meaning to ask her a question or two in connection with the murder. I couldn't find her, and the neighbors

said they hadn't seen her for a day or two. Got any idea where she is?"

"No, I haven't." Pinto was speaking in calmer tones now. "Likely as not she's visiting friends or relatives somewhere. Wimmen don't like to stay in a place where there's been a murder."

"Something in that. By the way, Pinto, when were you last inside the house?"

Again, for a mere instant, the patrolman's steps faltered. He threw the man at his side an uneasy glance. "Why, let me see. It was the day I had the Phantom locked up in the bedroom and he gave me the slip. Why did you want to know?"

"No reason in particular. I was just thinking that— But my mind's wandering. Got a bit tanked early in the evening. Guess I'll turn in. See you later."

With a yawn, he turned back, fancying there was a note of relief in the policeman's farewell. He smiled as he walked along. His conversation with Pinto had cleared up one point in his mind. The officer knew something of Mrs. Trippe's fate. The dread he had evinced at mention of the housekeeper's name proved that, and his prevarications and evasions were further evidence. The plea of indigestion and nervousness, coming from one of Pinto's robust physique, was highly amusing.

Yet, illuminating as his verbal fencing match with the patrolman had been, it had merely confirmed suspicions already firmly rooted in the Phantom's mind. As yet he had not a single iota of concrete evidence, and there were several snarled threads that had to be untangled before he could accomplish much. For instance, there was the mystery surrounding the murder of Mrs. Trippe and the equally perplexing riddle of what had become of the body.

Both of them must be solved before he could go far toward attaining his object.

He stopped, noticing that his mental processes had guided his steps toward the Gage house. It was still drizzling, and he was tired and hungry and wet, but the problem on which he was engaged drove all thought of rest and food from his mind. The blackness overhead was slowly breaking into a leaden gray, and from all directions came sounds of awakening life. He walked up to the door, believing that the answers to the questions that troubled him were to be found inside the house.

Then, out of the shadows, as it seemed to him, came an undersized creature with a slouching gait and glittering cat's eyes peering out from beneath the wide brim of a soft hat. The Phantom felt a slight touch on his elbow, and for an instant the sharply gleaming eyes scanned his face, then the queer-looking character shuffled away as swiftly and silently as he had appeared.

The Phantom was tempted to follow, but just then he noticed that a piece of paper was cramped between his fingers. He unfolded it and examined it in the meager light. All he could see at first was something crude and shapeless sketched with pencil, but gradually the blur dissolved into a symbol which he recognized.

It was a ducal coronet. The Phantom smiled as he looked down at the emblem of his old rival and enemy, the Duke. The paper handed him by the curious messenger was a reminder that the hand of his antagonist was reaching out for him, that though the Duke himself was in prison, his henchmen and agents were active, being at this very moment on the Phantom's trail.

He put the paper into his pocket, and in the same

moment the amused smile faded from his lips. For a time he had forgotten that, to all practical purposes, he was no longer the Gray Phantom, but one Thomas Granger, journalist. His lips tightened as again he gazed at the tracings on the paper. Did it mean that the Duke's emissaries had seen through his disguise and alias, or did it mean—his figure stiffened as the latter question flashed in his mind—that Thomas Granger was a member of the Duke's band?

In vain he pondered the problem, unable to decide whether the paper had been intended for himself or for Granger. If for himself, it seemed a somewhat idle and meaningless gesture on the Duke's part, for his old enemy surely could gain nothing by sending cryptic messages to him. On the other hand, assuming that the reporter was the intended recipient, what hidden meaning was Granger supposed to read into a ducal coronet?

He tried to dismiss the problem from his mind until he could have a talk with Granger, but thoughts of the mysterious message and the strange messenger pursued him as he once more turned to the door. The entrance to the store was padlocked, but the lock on the side door yielded readily to manipulation with one of the tools in his metal case. A quick glance to left and right assured him he was unobserved. Closing the door and taking out his electric flash, which he had transferred among other things to the suit he was now wearing, he ran up the steep and creaking stairs.

He stood in a long and narrow hall. At one end was a stairway, presumably leading to the store below, and along the sides of the corridor were three doors. Opening one of them, he played the electric beam over the interior, for he did not think it safe to turn on the light. It was a small, tidily furnished

bedroom, and the prevalence of feminine touches hinted that it had been occupied by the housekeeper. In the neatness and immaculateness of things there was not the slightest suggestion of tragedy, and he looked in vain for a sign that the occupant had been snatched from a humdrum life to a horrible death.

Yet, as his eyes flitted over the room, he felt a vague and haunting sense of oppression. It must be the air, he thought, which was heavy and stale, as if the window had not been opened for several days. The note handed him by the queer messenger was still a disturbing factor in his thoughts, and he took it from his pocket and examined it in the light of his flash.

At first he saw nothing but the crude pencil tracings in which he recognized the emblem of the Duke, but presently, as he gave closer attention to the outlines of the design, he detected tiny waves and jags that impressed him as being there for a purpose. He placed his magnifying lens between the electric flash and the paper, and now the uneven strokes dissolved into uncouth but fairly legible letters. He chuckled as he perceived that the Duke, always a lover of the theatrical, was in the habit of communicating with his agents by means of writing that had to be read through a magnifying lens.

Quickly he deciphered the script hidden in the ornate tracings. His face grew hard as a welter of ideas and suspicions surged through his mind. The message read:

Traitors sometimes die. Report at once.

The six words seemed to throb with a sinister meaning. They started a long train of thoughts in the Phantom's mind. For one thing, they proved

that the message was intended for Granger, since there was no reason why the Duke should accuse the Gray Phantom of treachery. They also made it clear that the reporter was a member of the Duke's new organization and that by some faithless act he had incurred the displeasure of the leaders of the band.

The Phantom loathed a traitor, but the Duke himself was no stickler for fair methods, and that a member of his gang should have been caught in a perfidious act was not particularly surprising. As the Phantom saw it, the chief importance of his discovery lay in the fact that he was still laboring under a serious handicap. He had thought that in assuming the guise of a newspaper reporter he would insure himself against molestation from all sides, but now it appeared that the man whose identity he had borrowed was an object of suspicion and possible vengeance. The threat in the first sentence of the message was clear and to the point.

He scowled darkly at the message, then folded it carefully and put it in his pocket. He still had an advantage, he told himself, for he was safe so far as the police were concerned. What he had to guard against was the stealthy machinations and intrigues of the Duke's band. On the whole, it was fortunate that the note had fallen into his possession, for forewarned was forearmed. Increased alertness and a few extra precautions would see him clear of the pitfalls.

Extinguishing his flash, he left the room and descended the stairs at the end of the hall, emerging behind the counter in the front of the store. He walked down the narrow aisle between the show case and the shelves that lined the wall. The door to Gage's bedroom was unlocked, and he entered. A

shaft of gray light slanting in beneath the window shade gave blurry outlines to the objects in the room. He passed to the window and pulled the curtain aside. It was a dull, bleak dawn, as dismal and gray as the one that had greeted him twenty-four hours ago when he crawled out of the tunnel.

His inspection of the room shed not the faintest ray of light on the questions in his mind. He searched carefully, sweeping the dark corners with his flash, but nothing appeared to have been touched since his last visit. Of the tragedy he had witnessed, not the slightest sign was to be found. Yet the scene was so vividly impressed on his mind that he felt as though the very walls were alive with the echoes of the dying woman's groans. He could still see the quickly moving hand that had held the knife.

"Whose hand?" he asked. It had been a mere flash, and, as far as he could recall, there had been nothing distinctive about it. It was not likely he would recognize the hand if he should see it a second time; yet the question was already settled in his mind. The housekeeper herself had given him the answer to it in the few words she had gasped out just before the blow was struck:

"He's killing me! He's afraid I'll tell!"

She had referred to Pinto, of course, for her previous words and looks, the Gray Phantom thought, had clearly shown that she suspected the policeman of having murdered her employer. It was a safe inference, then, that Pinto had slain the housekeeper in order to seal her lips forever, and the Phantom wondered whether the patrolman was not also responsible for the barricade at the end of the tunnel. It seemed plausible enough. Pinto must have known that there had been a witness to his deed, though he probably did not know that this witness had seen

only a hand and a knife. It was even possible that the policeman had seen more of the Phantom than the Phantom had seen of him. At any rate, he was doubtless aware that the housekeeper's words had been addressed to someone hidden in the opening back of the revolving frame. Fearing that this person would betray him, he had quickly slammed the frame into place, after which he had run around to Doctor Bimble's cellar and blocked the mouth of the passage, intending that the witness to his crime should smother to death.

So much seemed clear; at least it furnished a hypothesis in the light of which the strange events of the night before were explainable. The only puzzling factor in the situation was the disappearance of the body. The Phantom, cudgel his wits as he might, could see no other solution than that the murderer must have removed it. No one else would have been likely to do so. If the body had been found by anyone else the matter would have been promptly reported to the police, and without doubt another crime would have been chalked up against the Gray Phantom. Scanning the mystery from every angle, the Phantom could see no other explanation than that the body had been concealed by the murderer.

"But why?" he asked himself. So far as he could see, the murderer could have had no reason for covering up the crime, which in the absence of contrary proof would have been imputed to the Gray Phantom. The police and the press would have jumped instantly to the conclusion that the arch-rogue had followed up the killing of Gage with the murder of the housekeeper, and their fertile brains could easily have invented several plausible motives. This, to all appearances, would have suited the murderer to

perfection. Why, then, had he gone out of his way to keep the crime secret?

The Phantom's mind churned the problem for several minutes before the answer came to him. As is often the case, it was so ludicrously simple that he wondered why he had not seen it at once.

"Clear as daylight!" he decided. "The murderer knew the crime couldn't be fastened on me, because I had an alibi. I was in jail, so to speak, when the murder was committed. Of course, I was in jail only by proxy, the real prisoner being Tommie Granger, but the murderer didn't know that until later. He thought I was locked up, and that was enough for him."

The Phantom backed out of the room. His visit to the scene of the two murders had helped him to clarify certain problems, but he had accomplished nothing definite. His suspicions in regard to Pinto had become stronger, but as yet he had not a shred of actual proof against the man. He considered what his next step should be as he walked across the store and started up the stairs. For several reasons, he decided, he must have a talk with Thomas Granger at once.

He paused for an instant outside the housekeeper's bedroom, then walked on to the next door, which opened into a kitchen. The third door, the one farthest down the hall, gave access to a large room, and the tall tiers of boxes and packing cases indicated that Gage had used it for storage purposes. Abstractedly he let the gleam of his electric flash glide over the floor and the long, jagged cracks in the begrimed ceiling. He was looking for nothing in particular, and apparently there was nothing to find.

Yet, as he started to walk out, something held

him. He could not analyze the sensation at first, but it was one he had experienced before, and it was associated in his mind with dreadful and awe-inspiring things. He could not name it, but it gave him the impression that he stood in the presence of death.

He started forward, but of a sudden he checked himself and listened intently to sounds coming from the direction of the stairs. They were short, creaking, and irregular sounds, like those produced by a heavy man when he tries to walk lightly, and they gave the Phantom an impression of hesitancy and furtiveness.

The stealthy footfalls drew nearer. Quietly the Phantom pushed the door shut, took the pistol from his pocket, and stepped behind a row of packing cases. The footsteps were now almost at the door. An interval of silence came, as if the person outside were hesitating before he entered, then the door came open and a dark shape prowled across the floor.

CHAPTER XVI

THE OTHER LINK

THE room was in total darkness save for a tiny sliver of light filtering in through a crack between the packing cases stacked against the window. The prowler advanced gropingly after closing the door behind him, and from time to time he cleared his throat with little rasping sounds, as some persons do when laboring under intense excitement.

The Phantom, wedged in a narrow opening between two rows of boxes, presently heard a faint scraping, as if the intruder were passing his hand back and forth in search of a light switch. All he could see was a shadow moving hither and thither in the gloom, but the prowler's quick breathing and jerky footsteps told that, whatever might be his errand, he was going about it in a state of great trepidation.

A sudden flash of light caused the Phantom to press hard against the wall, for he wished to ascertain the other's business before making his presence known. He judged from the sounds made by the prowler that he must be at the opposite side of the room, and a succession of loud, creaking noises indicated that he was dragging some of the cases away from the wall. After a little the sounds ceased and the only audible thing was the prowler's hard pant-

ing, mingling now and then with a low, hoarse mutter.

The Phantom stood very still. A curious feeling was stealing over him. It was the same weird and oppressive sensation he had experienced shortly after entering the room, but now it was more pronounced, filling him with a sense of awe which he could not understand.

The prowler's footfalls, moving toward the door, broke the spell. The Phantom, casting off the uncomfortable sensation with a shrug of his shoulders, stepped out from his hiding place just as a hand gripped the doorknob.

"Hello, Pinto!" He spoke in a drawl, toying carelessly with his pistol. Out of the corner of an eye he slanted a look at an object lying on the floor. It had not been there when he entered.

The patrolman's face had been white even before he spoke; now it was ashen and ghastly. His eyes, wide with horror, bored into the Phantom's face. Several times he moistened his twitching lips before he was able to speak.

"Where did you co—come from?" he gasped.

"Why, nowhere in particular. Just taking a walk. Changed my mind about going home. But don't look at me as if I was a ghost. Makes me nervous. Great heavens, what's this?"

He started at the grewsome heap on the floor as if he had just now chanced to cast eye upon it. Pinto made a heroic effort to steady himself. His quavering gaze moved reluctantly toward the motionless form lying a few feet from where he stood.

"That's—that's Mrs. Trippe," he announced, twisting his head and working his Adam's apple as if on the point of choking.

"So I see." The Phantom stepped closer to the

body, regarded it gravely for a few moments, then lifted his narrowing gaze to the policeman's twitching face. "Where did it come from, Pinto?"

The officer was gradually gaining control of himself. He took out his handkerchief and mopped his perspiring forehead. "Awful sight—ain't it, Granger? I thought I heard some kind of racket just as I was passing the house. I tried the doors, and the one at the side was unlocked. I thought it was queer, for I had made sure it was locked when I passed the other time, so I ran up the stairs and looked around. When I came in here and turned on the light, I found that thing lying there. It broke me all up. Fine scoop for your paper, Granger, if you grab it before the other reporters do."

Smiling, the Phantom looked Pinto squarely in the eye. "Your story needs a little dressing up. It doesn't hang together. Maybe you would have been able to think up a better one if your nerves hadn't been on the jump. For one thing, Pinto, no cop goes into hysterics at sight of a dead body unless his conscience is giving him the jimjams. For another, you didn't find the body where it is lying now. Unless I am very much mistaken, you dragged it out from behind those packing cases."

He pointed to a corner of the room where several large boxes had been displaced. The shamefaced expression of a man caught in a clumsy lie mingled with the look of dread in Pinto's countenance.

"What you driving at?" he demanded with a feeble show of bluster.

The Phantom's mind worked quickly. In the last fifteen minutes his suspicions in regard to Pinto had become a certainty. The policeman's conduct left not a shred of doubt as to his guilt, but the evidence the law would require was still lacking. Pinto would

soon gather his wits and invent a more plausible explanation than the one he had just given, and on an issue of veracity between the Gray Phantom and an officer of the law, the latter would have all the advantages. The Phantom, swiftly appraising the situation, saw that his only hope lay in subtler tactics. Perhaps by adroitly working on the policeman's evident pusillanimity he could induce him to make a clean breast of it.

"The game's up, Pinto," he said sternly. "You murdered Mrs. Trippe, just as you murdered Gage. Better come clean."

A ghastly grin wrinkled the patrolman's face. "Think so, eh? You newspaper guys think you're pretty wise, don't you? Well, what proof have you got?"

For answer the Phantom decided on a random thrust. He took a pencil and a sheet of paper from his pocket and, placing his pistol on a packing case, roughly sketched a ducal coronet. He held the design close to the patrolman's eyes.

Pinto glanced at the sketch. With a hoarse cry he shrank back a step, but in a moment, by an exertion of will power, he had partly mastered his emotion. He guffawed loudly.

"Looks like a crow's nest to me," he gibed.

"You recognized it just the same, Pinto. Your face told me you did, so there's no use denying it. You're a member of the Duke's crew. You had orders to kill Gage, and you did. It was fairly clever, too, the way you arranged things so suspicion would fall on—ahem, on the Gray Phantom. But the housekeeper somehow saw through you. She was wise to you. And so, fearing she might tell what she knew and send you to the chair, you killed her, too. Then——"

"You've got *some* imagination, you have!" jeered the policeman, struggling hard to maintain a grip on himself.

"Then," continued the Phantom coolly, "you carried the body up here and hid it. Not a very clever move, but you were scared at the time, and people do queer things when they are panicky. You realized the Phantom couldn't be blamed for the murder of Mrs. Trippe, for he was in jail when the job was done. Anyhow, everybody thought he was, which amounted to the same thing. You were in no condition to reason things out, and the only safe way out of the mess you had made seemed to be to hide the body. It would postpone discovery of the murder for a while and give you a chance to think. The hiding place you picked wasn't a very good one, but it was the best you could find in a hurry."

"Yeah?" taunted Pinto. "Been hitting the booze again, ain't you?"

"No; I'm sober for once. Well, Pinto, after our little talk a while ago you were a bit worried. You knew someone would find the body sooner or later, and you thought things would look better all around if you were the one to find it. Anyhow, there was no reason for keeping it hidden longer after it turned out that the police had nabbed the wrong man and the Phantom had no alibi. I suppose if I hadn't stopped you when I did, you would now be at the telephone reporting your discovery to the station house."

As he spoke, the Phantom studied every change of expression in the other's face. Pinto winced as if each word had been a needle prick, but he seemed to be drawing on a reserve force of fortitude, for his courage was rising rather than ebbing.

"After pulling all that dream stuff," he said sneeringly, "mebbe you'll come across with the evidence."

"Sure thing." The Phantom's tones belied his crumbling hopes. He realized he had no evidence, and Pinto showed no signs of breaking down. "If what I've said doesn't hit the bull's-eye, why did you sneak in here and drag the body out from behind the packing cases? You seemed to be making a bee line for it. How did you know it was there?"

"So that's what you call evidence!" Pinto sneered. "I guess if it comes down to brass tacks, my word's as good as yours. Now that you've got all that stuff off your chest, mebbe you'll answer a question or two, and you might begin by telling what you're doing here yourself."

"A reporter goes everywhere."

"Reporter—huh! You've been on the *Sphere* four weeks, and soused half the time. You came here from Kansas City. You worked on a newspaper there only a week or two, according to the dope the department got. Seems you've been tramping around a lot in your days. Mebbe you're an honest-to-goodness reporter, and mebbe you're not. I've got a hunch of my own."

"Let's hear it," said the Phantom lightly, though inwardly he felt somewhat uneasy. Pinto's gaze, constantly searching his face, was growing keener with every passing moment.

"Well, it looks mighty queer to me that you showed up in this burg just a few weeks ahead of the Phantom, especially since you two look so much alike. What's queerer still is that you got pinched the other day just when the Phantom was as good as caught in the net. He would have been hauled in if you hadn't been grabbed by mistake."

"So, that's it." The Phantom chuckled amusedly.

"Just because it happened that way, you're thinking that I am acting as a foil for the Gray Phantom."

"You got me just right, Granger. I'm thinking that, though I'm not saying much about it yet. Here's another little thing I'd like to get your opinion on." He came a step closer, looked hard at the Phantom, and put the question sharply. "What's become of Helen Hardwick?"

"He-Helen Hardwick?" The Phantom stood rigid, mouth gaping and eyes staring.

"She's the one. They say the Phantom has a crush on her and that it was on her account he handed the Duke that wallop some months ago. She's supposed——"

The Phantom, his face deathly white, clutched Pinto's arm in a grip that made the policeman squirm. "What about Miss Hardwick?" he demanded hoarsely. "Has anything happened to her? Speak, man!"

Pinto freed his arm and gave him a searching look. "All I know is that she's missing, and I thought mebbe you——"

"Missing?" echoed the Phantom sharply. "What do you mean? Speak up!"

In his excitement he did not see that the look of perplexity in Pinto's eyes had given way to a cunning twinkle. In another moment the policeman had acted with a precision and a swiftness that indicated he was a far shrewder man that his looks led one to think. In an instant the pistol had been beaten from the Phantom's numb hand and in the space of a few seconds a steel link was gyved around his wrist.

"There, Mr. Gray Phantom!" exclaimed the policeman with a triumphant chuckle. "I guess you won't get away from me this time!"

The Phantom, at last sensing his danger, jumped

to one side, but already the other link was fastened around the policeman's wrist. Pinto's words regarding Helen Hardwick had stunned him momentarily, and he had not seen his peril until it was too late. Now he was a prisoner, handcuffed to his captor!

"This is more like it!" exclaimed the policeman, kicking aside the pistol his prisoner had dropped and shoving his own weapon against the Phantom's diaphragm. "I've had a hunch all along that, if you weren't the Phantom himself, you were his alibi. I'm wise now, all right. You gave yourself away when I spoke the name of the moll. You turned white to the gills and almost jumped out of your shoes. Guess you forgot to play your rôle that time, Mr. Phantom. Granger, not being in love with the lady, wouldn't have thrown a fit like that. Well, we're off for the station. You can hand 'em the spiel you gave me, and see how much they believe of it."

"Before we start, tell me what you know of Miss Hardwick," pleaded the Phantom, for his own plight still seemed of secondary importance.

Pinto shrugged his shoulders. "She's vamoosed; that's all I know. Come along. Mebbe she'll drop in and see you when you're in jail."

"Jail!" He braced his weight against the pull at his wrist. "I'm not going to jail—not while Miss Hardwick's in trouble. You may be a little stronger than I, Pinto, but I'm in better trim, and you can't budge me."

The policeman tore at the link, but in vain. The Phantom dropped to the floor, dug his heels into a crack between two boards, and resisted with all his might. Pinto puffed and cursed, but he might as well have tried to lift himself by his own boot straps, and his efforts were further hampered by the necessity of keeping the pistol aimed with his free hand.

The glint in his captive's eyes hinted that he was but waiting for a chance to land a blow with his fist between the policeman's eyes.

"Say, what's the use stalling?" argued Pinto, resorting to diplomacy while regaining his breath. "The game's up."

The Phantom knew it, but he was playing for time. Some unexpected turn might yet reverse the situation and give him the upper hand.

"You're done for, and you know it," said the policeman impressively. "Might as well give in."

"Wrong, Pinto. You seem convinced that I'm the Gray Phantom, and you ought to know that the Phantom never gives in. I can sit here as long as you can. Don't you think we had better compromise?"

"Compromise—your grandmother!" grumbled Pinto. "You'll never get out of this."

Still pointing the muzzle at his prisoner, he brought the butt of the weapon close to one of his pockets. Two fingers reached down and extracted a police whistle, and in an instant it was between his lips, giving forth a shrill blast. He waited expectantly for a few moments. Again and again the whistle shrieked, but no response came.

The Phantom grinned. "The acoustics are not all that might be desired. The windows are closed, and there are several heavy walls between here and the street. I fear, Pinto, that your lung power is going to waste."

Disgustedly Pinto dropped the whistle. He considered for a moment, then a grim smile lit up his face.

"You've sung your last tune, Mr. Phantom," he muttered. "There's always a way to handle the likes of you."

As he spoke, he quickly shifted his hold on the pistol, and in another moment the handle crashed down on the prisoner's head. Of a sudden the Phantom felt himself grow limp. A laugh broke hoarsely through the gloom that descended upon him. He heard a voice, but it sounded faint and remote, as if coming to him across a vast chasm.

"Guess you won't get out of *that!*"

Then, miles away, a door slammed. He exerted a supreme effort to shake off the numbness brought on by the unexpected blow. His eyes fluttered open. His mind struggled out of the blinding haze. The light was still on, and his staring eyes flitted slowly about the room. It seemed only a moment ago that the door had slammed. Pinto was nowhere in sight, and for a moment he wondered at this.

Then, his mind clearing, it came to him that the policeman had gone out to summon assistance. He had had his lesson, and this time he was taking no chances with so dangerous and elusive a prisoner as the Gray Phantom. Doubtless he would be back in a few moments, and then——

He raised himself to a sitting posture. A hideous recollection electrified his body and mind. Helen Hardwick was missing, Pinto had said. Perhaps she was in trouble; perhaps some desperate danger confronted her. He must find her at once, and he must get out of the room before Pinto returned with reënforcements.

He tried to rise, but something restrained him. It was the steel link around his wrist. Only a moment ago, so it seemed, the other link had been fastened to Pinto's hand. Now——

A groan of horror broke from his lips as he saw the thing to which he was linked by a band of steel.

Pinto had, indeed, taken no chances. Even if the Phantom could get out of the room, his hand would be chained to the cold, dead hand of the housekeeper.

CHAPTER XVII

THE DUKE'S MESSENGER

IN vain the Phantom spurred his wits to find a way out, but the thought that hurt him most was that he was helpless at a moment when Helen Hardwick might be in danger.

What had happened to her? His imagination pictured one fearful possibility after another. The one that seemed most likely was that the Duke's agents, aware of the Phantom's interest in the girl, had lured her into a trap. The Duke, thorough and artful in all things, could be depended upon to miss no opportunity to make his revenge complete.

He tried to clear his mind of harrowing surmises. His situation was desperate, and now as never before he needed to think coolly and act quickly. At any moment Pinto might return, and the seconds were precious. The thought that sustained him was that his wits had never yet failed him in an emergency, and that always in the past he had contrived to squeeze out of tight corners by performing some astounding feat.

Yet, was his dismal afterthought, he had never before faced a situation quite like this. To escape with a lifeless form gyved to his hand was out of the question. He looked swiftly about the room, but saw nothing that suggested a means of deliverance. Even the pistol he had dropped had been removed by the thoughtful Pinto. If he escaped, was his conclusion, it would be only by a stroke of amazing luck.

Suddenly, as a new thought came to him, he thrust his free hand into his inside breast pocket. His face brightened a little. Pinto had overlooked something, after all. His case, with its assortment of carefully selected tools, was still there. Evidently Pinto had not thought it necessary to search his pockets. He took out the little box and ran his eyes over the snugly packed implements, each of which had been prepared with a definite purpose in view.

Quickly he tried several of his sharp-pointed tools in the locks of the handcuffs, but the mechanism was proof against manipulation, and he soon gave up the attempt. Next he picked out a small, fine-toothed saw, but he realized he would only be wasting time if he tried to cut through the chilled steel of which the links were made. It might be done if he had hours at his command.

A step sounded in the hall. One more hope remained. From his case he took a small capsule, pointed at one end and scarcely longer than a pin. It contained a combustible powder, and the Phantom had carried it with him for just such an emergency as this. Now he took one of Granger's cigarettes from his pocket, inserted the capsule at one end, and put the cigarette in his mouth. Then he returned the case to his pocket and, just as the door came open, was making an elaborate pretense of hunting for a match.

He looked up with an air of unconcern—and in the next instant the cigarette dropped from his gaping lips. He had expected Pinto to walk in with one or more of his colleagues, but instead he saw the dwarfish creature who had handed him the paper bearing the Duke's emblem.

For a few moments the little man remained in the doorway, sweeping the room with a quick, nervous

glance, then closed the door and came forward. Mechanically the Phantom restored the cigarette to his lips while staring at the queer intruder. The electric light lent a yellow tinge to his shriveled face —a face so gloomy and sour that it gave the impression of never having been lit up by a grin. He drew a pistol from his pocket as he approached the Phantom.

"Well, Granger, you sure got into a mess," he observed, speaking in a wheezy, drawling voice.

"So it seems," agreed the Phantom, his mind working quickly. "Got a match?"

The weazened individual handed him one, but the Phantom seemed in no hurry to light his cigarette.

"I kinda thought you'd get yourself in bad, the way you carried on," continued the little man, gazing indifferently at the body. "Didn't you savvy the note I slipped you?"

"It was plain enough."

"But you paid no more attention than if it had been an invitation to a dog fight."

"I didn't think there was any great rush," said the Phantom cautiously. "I thought to-morrow would be time enough."

"Time enough? He, he! Well, you're a queer one, Granger. Guess you don't know the big chief the way I do. When he sends for you it means he wants you right away. He's already kinda leery about you and— But that's your funeral. Hope for your sake you can square yourself with him. It's a lucky thing I turned back and got on your trail after slipping you the note."

The Phantom, wondering what had happened to the policeman, looked uneasily at the door. "Where's Pinto?" he asked after a pause.

"The cop? Oh, I fixed him. Handed him one

from the rear as he was starting down the stairs, and he never knew what struck him. Just gave a grunt and went down like a bag of cement. You see, I'd been standing at the door trying to get the hang of the gabfest between you and him. I couldn't hear much—only a word now and then—but when the door opens and the cop walks out I know there's trouble, and so I hand him one on the bean. Say, how much is that cop wise to?"

"Eh?" The Phantom stared for an instant, uncertain how he should play his rôle, but he quickly grasped the threads of the situation. "Oh, Pinto is away off on his hunches. Hasn't the least idea I'm one of your gang, but thinks I am dragging a red herring across the Phantom's trail. Rich—what?"

The other chuckled mirthlessly. "I'll say it is. Well, the cop won't do any talking for quite a long stretch, and when he comes to things will be kind of hazy in his coco. You'd better come along with me and make your spiel to the big chief. You'll have to do some tall explaining, and, unless you can square yourself, you may wish the cop had got you."

There was an ugly smirk on the man's lips and he spoke the last words as if gloating over the ordeal in store for the other.

The Phantom shrugged his shoulders. "I can explain things to the big chief. What worries me is the bracelet on my wrist!"

"I'll get the key out of the cop's pocket," announced the little man.

The Phantom gazed after him as he left the room. A little while ago he had told himself that only a stroke of magic could save him, and the weazened creature's appearance at the crucial moment seemed almost miraculous. Yet he looked a trifle dubious.

"I'm coming out of the fire," he mumbled, "but I

haven't the least idea what the frying pan will be like. The little rat may be hard to shake, and Pinto will spoil my alibi as soon as he comes out of oblivion."

The small man returned and tossed a metallic object at the Phantom's feet, then stood aside, with pistol leveled, while the handcuffs were being unlocked. His sharp eyes followed every move the Phantom made, but evidently there was not the faintest suspicion in his mind as to the identity of the man with whom he was dealing. In all likelihood he knew Granger but slightly and had never seen much of him.

"There!" exclaimed the Phantom as the link around his wrist parted. "Pinto will be the most surprised cop in creation when he walks in here and finds the bird flown. I'm dying for a smoke."

He rose to his feet and struck the match, glancing narrowly at the other as he lighted his cigarette. There was a look of habitual alertness in the little man's glittering eyes, and the pistol in his hand more than equalized his physical disadvantage.

"Look here, Granger," he said in harsh, wheezy tones, "I don't quite know how to size you up, but you and the chief are going to have a chat directly. I'm putting my gat inside my pocket—like this. I'll have my finger on the trigger all the time, so you'd better watch your step. We're off."

He motioned the Phantom to start. With a hard pull on his cigarette, the Phantom drew in all the smoke his mouth could hold, strolled forward with an easy swagger, and, turning abruptly on the little man, blew a cloud of smoke into his face.

The victim gasped, spluttered, and choked, then was seized with an attack of sneezing that racked his sides and convulsed his entire body. Spasm after

spasm shook the puny figure until the little man was quite exhausted. Covering his nose and mouth, the Phantom stepped behind him and snatched the pistol from his pocket.

"The sneezing powder worked even better than the last time I tried it," he observed with a chuckle.

"Ker-choooo!" was the other's explosive comment. "Ker-chooooo!"

Slowly the acrid fumes drifted toward the ceiling. The little man, with tears streaming from his red-lidded eyes, lurched toward one of the rows of packing cases and leaned against it. The smoke was scattering, but repeated fits of sneezing were still jolting his frame.

The Phantom smothered the cigarette under his heel. A simple trick had turned the situation in his favor, but now he faced another problem. How to dispose of the little man and Pinto was a poser. The former did not worry him, for he had bungled his job miserably, and silence and discretion were highly esteemed virtues in the Duke's organization.

It was different with Pinto. The policeman had seen through the Phantom's disguise. Immediately upon recovering consciousness he would report that the Phantom was masquerading as Thomas Granger, and that would be the end of the ruse. The personality he had borrowed would no longer protect the Phantom, and he would once more be a hunted man and obliged to watch his step at every turn.

On the other hand, it was just possible Pinto would not tell what he had discovered. The policeman had a bad conscience, and that in itself made a difference. Besides, the Phantom had twice slipped out of his hands and he had achieved nothing whereof he could boast. His pride and his con-

science, each a powerful factor, would be very likely to seal his lips.

Suddenly he smiled. To make doubly sure, he would provide Pinto with a third motive for maintaining silence. Without doubt the policeman shared the average man's fear of ridicule, and the Phantom could work on that.

The sneezings had ceased. The victim, looking as though every ounce of strength had been drained from him, peered vacantly at the Phantom while the latter removed the second link from the dead woman's hand. Exhausted by the sneezing fits and deprived of his weapon, he was as helpless as a snake stripped of its poisonous glands.

"Put your hands behind you," directed the Phantom.

The little man made as if inclined to resist, but thought better of it and obediently put his hands at his back. He uttered a feeble yawp as one of the links was clasped about his wrist. With the other in his hand, the Phantom led him from the room and turned toward the stairs. A dark, inert heap lay at the head of the stairway, with legs sprawling over the steps. It was Pinto.

"Sit down," ordered the Phantom.

The puny man looked about him dazedly, then sat down on the top step, uttering a weak protest as he found himself handcuffed to the unconscious man.

The Phantom examined Pinto's head. A large swelling at the back told that the little man had put far more force behind the blow than one would have thought it possible for such a dwarfish creature to exert. The pulse was weak and fluttering, and the eyes had a rigid and glassy look. The Phantom

had known of similar cases in which the victims had remained unconscious for days, and many things might happen before Pinto's mind and tongue were functioning again. Upon awakening and being told that he had been found handcuffed to a rat of the underworld, the policeman, already troubled by an evil conscience and wounded self-respect, would hardly invite the taunts and jeers of his fellow officers by going into exact details. At any rate, the Phantom felt he was playing his best card.

"Say, Granger," whined the little man, "ain't going to leave me like this, are you? Not after I got you out of the fix you were in?"

"It is a bit rough on you, I admit, but you will have to make the best of it. Your reasons for getting me out of the scrape weren't entirely unselfish. I believe it was your intention to put me on the carpet before the big chief."

The other jerked his head in the direction of the storeroom. "They'll say I croaked that woman in there," he muttered.

"Not a chance. Examination of the body will show that the murder was committed more than twenty-four hours ago. What they probably will think is that Pinto caught you in the act of robbery and that you assaulted him after he had handcuffed you to him. One guess will be about as good as another, though, and you will have to lie yourself out of the mess somehow. I wish you luck."

He started down the stairs, but in the middle he stopped and looked back. What if Pinto should *never* recover consciousness? If he should die before the two murder mysteries were fully cleared up, the Phantom's efforts to exculpate himself would encounter a serious hindrance. But nothing was to

be gained by worrying over what might happen, he told himself, and just now he had something far more serious to think about. His fears concerning Helen overshadowed all other things.

He went out onto the street. The morning was far advanced and the sun was struggling through a curtain of scattering clouds. The glaring headlines of the morning papers spread out on the news stands at the corner told how the Phantom, after having been seen at an elevated railway station the night before, had once more slipped through the dragnet. After a brief glance at the introductory paragraphs, he crossed the street and entered the telephone booth in the rear of a drug store. There he consulted the directory and called the number of the Hardwick residence.

A woman, evidently a servant, answered. The Phantom announced that he was a reporter on the *Sphere* and wished to speak with the master of the house. After a few moments' wait a masculine voice came over the wire. It trembled a little, as if its owner was trying to control an intense excitement. Mr. Hardwick was at first unwilling to discuss the matter, but after repeated urgings admitted that he had requested the police to search for his daughter, who had been missing for two days. She had left home without explanations of any kind, and nothing had been heard from her since. As it was entirely unlike her to go away for any length of time without notifying her father, Mr. Hardwick feared something had happened to her.

The Phantom's face had a blank look as he emerged from the booth. He remembered Miss Hardwick's sudden and mysterious disappearance from Doctor Bimble's laboratory. Something must

have befallen her after leaving the scientist's house, and the fact that she had not communicated with her father was disquieting.

He went out on the sidewalk and turned toward the corner. Of a sudden he was all caution and alertness. Someone was watching him.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE STARTING POINT

THE Phantom feigned utter unconcern as he continued toward the corner. His acute senses had instantly registered the fact that he was an object of scrutiny. It vexed him not a little, for he was anxious to get on Helen Hardwick's trail, and he had no relish for another adventure with the police. He looked about him out of the tail of an eye as he advanced with a leisurely swing.

It took him but a few moments to pick out the watcher from among the sprinkling of loungers and pedestrians on the sidewalk. The man's dull face and stolid expression did not deceive the Phantom for a moment. He stood with his back against a shop window, and part of his face was hidden by a newspaper he pretended to be reading. The Phantom walked up beside him.

"You're a detective, aren't you?"

The man lowered the newspaper and gazed at the questioner out of deceptively sluggish eyes.

"What makes you think so?"

The Phantom chuckled, though he knew he was treading on dangerous ground. It was just possible that Granger, although he had not been long in the city and therefore could not have an extensive police acquaintance, had met this particular detective. A careful study of the man's face reassured him, however.

"Oh, I spotted you easily enough," was his answer. "I suppose you have heard of me. I am Thomas Granger, of the *Sphere*."

The other gave a slight nod. A faint grin creased his face. "I've heard of you, all right. On the day you were pinched, they tell me, you had the beautifulest jag on that's been seen in this town in many a day. Why don't you put a fellow wise to your source of supply?"

"I may," with a knowing wink, "if you promise not to jug me again."

"Well, you needn't rub it in, Granger. You look a lot like the Gray Phantom. If you didn't have those glad rags on, I wouldn't be able to tell the difference. I never met the Phantom face to face, but judging from his picture I should say you're as much alike as two peas. By the way, my name is Culligore—Lieutenant Culligore."

The Phantom repressed a start. He had seen the name in the earlier newspaper accounts of the murder and remembered that Culligore had been one of the detectives assigned to the case. He wondered whether it were possible that he and Granger had not met while the reporter was getting the facts of the tragedy for his paper. The detective's face showed no sign of suspicion, but the Phantom noticed that he had an odd habit of rubbing his upper lip against the tip of his nose, and the little mannerism impressed him as significant of deep and devious mental processes.

"That reminds me!" he exclaimed suddenly, as if just recalling something. "There's been a brand-new murder committed over at the Gage house."

The detective lifted his brows.

"I was snooping around, hoping to find some new twist to the case," explained the Phantom. "In a

storeroom on the second floor I found the body of the housekeeper. She looked as though she had been dead a good many hours. Pinto is lying on the stairs with a bump on the back of his head, and he's handcuffed to a little shrimp that looks like a dope fiend."

Lieutenant Culligore stared as he heard the strange report. "Been drinking again?"

"Go and see for yourself."

Culligore at last showed signs of activity. "Better come along," he suggested. "If you've been telling me the truth, there ought to be a good story in it for you."

"I've seen enough. Going back to the office to write it up."

The two parted. As Culligore started to cross the street, he made a curious motion with his hand, and the Phantom fancied he was signaling someone on the other side. He walked briskly toward the elevated station. Evidently Culligore had put a colleague on his trail, thereby showing that he was not so unsuspecting as the Phantom had thought. He ascended the stairs and walked out onto the platform without a single backward glance, but his ears, trained to catch and classify the slightest sounds, told him a pursuer was behind him.

The train, a southbound one, was crowded with passengers. The Phantom selected a strap near the rear end of one of the cars. The many curious glances leveled in his direction told him he was being recognized as the newspaper reporter who had won fame by being mistaken for the Gray Phantom and whose photograph had appeared side by side with that of the notorious rogue. While ostensibly absorbed in an advertisement, he cast a sidelong glance at the platform of the car just ahead. The brief

glimpse sufficed to identify his pursuer as a broad-shouldered individual in a brown suit, whose rather commonplace features were shaded by the brim of a derby.

The Phantom was in a quandary. He could accomplish nothing with a "shadow" at his heels, and there was something maddening in the thought that he was losing time while Helen Hardwick might be in danger. He could probably elude his pursuer without much difficulty, but that would be a confession that he had something to hide, and might possibly result in his being picked up on a general alarm. He was safe behind the personality of Thomas Granger only so long as he did not engage in suspicious conduct.

An idea flashed in his mind as he caught a glimpse of the skyscrapers of City Hall Park. He would take the bull by the horns, he decided. The safest and surest way of averting suspicion from himself was to play his borrowed rôle boldly and thoroughly. He would proceed at once to the offices of the *Sphere* and make a judiciously colored report of the latest affair at the Gage house. It was a dangerous experiment, but the Phantom believed he could carry it out. A bold play, a bit of clever acting, and the usual accompaniment of good luck were all that was necessary.

He was still conscious of pursuit as he alighted and turned in the direction of the *Sphere* Building. A glance at the bulletin board in the rotunda showed him the location of the editorial rooms, and he ascended in the elevator. The mirrors lining the walls of the cage threw back at him a reflection showing signs of suspense, worry, and want of sleep. His face was drawn and furrowed, and the usual luster of his eyes was a trifle dimmed, but these symptoms

might also be indications of heavy drinking, and they enhanced his resemblance to Granger.

The building throbbed with the pulsations of presses. From above, like a continuous rattle of shrapnel, came the din and clatter of the linotypes. Faint odors of ink and whiffs from the sterotyping and photo-engraving plants hung in the air.

The Phantom stepped out with a jaunty appearance, though inwardly he was quailing a trifle. A sign on frosted glass told him which door to enter, and a red-haired youth presiding at a desk in an anteroom grinned broadly as he passed through. A dozen typewriters jabbered noisily in the room beyond. As the Phantom walked in, a spectacled, shirt-sleeved man seated at a desk near the entrance looked up and regarded him with twinkling eyes.

" 'Lo, Granger," was his good-humored greeting. "Understand 'Old War Horse' tied a can to you last night."

"Did he?" asked the Phantom, guessing that the individual referred to was the autocrat who had ordered Granger bounced. "It was a large night, and I don't remember the minor details." He looked uncertainly about the room, as if his vision was a trifle clouded. "Where is the old fire-eater? Don't see him around."

"Of course, you don't." The spectacled man laughed. "Old War Horse is in bed, where he belongs. I guess you haven't quite recovered your bearings yet, or you'd know that Slossdick is on the day shift. I see him looking this way, as if he had designs on you."

The Phantom trailed the spectacled man's glance to a glass-partioned cubby-hole at the other end of the room, where a bald and sharp-nosed man sat at a desk. He advanced airily, grinning in response to

the knowing winks and well-meant banter that followed him, and boldly approached the scowling personage at the desk.

"Don't you know you're fired?" demanded Slossdick, jabbing at a page of "copy" with his pencil.

"Am I?" inquired the Phantom innocently. He spoke with a little catch, as if he had a slight cold, and he avoided the sunlight streaming in through the window. "It hadn't occurred to me."

"No? Old War Horse had you kicked out, didn't he? You'd been insulting him again, I understand." Slossdick's devastating pencil ripped an entire paragraph out of the copy before him. "What's biting you this morning?"

"Nothing," said the Phantom blandly. "Just thought you might like to know that there's been another murder at the Gage house."

The slashings of Slossdick's pencil ceased abruptly. He swept the Phantom's face with a quick, searching glance. Briefly the impostor told as much as he thought prudent, describing the scene in the storeroom and at the head of the stairs, without telling of his own part in the night's events or of Pinto's mysterious conduct. He was not yet ready to accuse the policeman openly, and for the present it suited his purpose to leave the affair vague and mysterious.

There was a flicker of interest in Slossdick's eyes. "Housekeeper murdered and policeman lying at the head of the stairs handcuffed to a dope. Rattling good yarn, Granger. But"—and a look of doubt crept into his face—"we've had nothing from the police on this."

"Good reason. The police didn't know of it till a few minutes ago. If you hurry, you will beat the other papers to it."

Slossdick snatched up the telephone and called a

department. "First page make-over," he snapped when the connection had been established. Then, turning to the Phantom: "Think you can see the typewriter keys this morning?"

The Phantom quavered inwardly. Typewriting was not among his accomplishments, and the entire proceeding was strange to him. He hesitated, noticing that the rumble of the presses had already ceased.

"Well, never mind," grumbled Slossdick, his pencil already at work on an eight-column caption. "Give the dope to Fessenden and let him write it. Then go home and get some sleep. You look as if you needed it. And, for the love of Mike, steer clear of the booze! Fessenden!"

In response to the explosive shout, a lanky and dyspeptic-looking man appeared at the door to the cubby-hole. After receiving a few terse directions from Slossdick, he led the Phantom to his desk and sat down before his typewriter. He inserted a sheet of paper in the machine while listening, and his fingers were racing over the keys even before the Phantom had finished his recital.

"Bully yarn you've turned up," came his appreciative comment over the clatter of the keys. "A peach!"

The Phantom walked away. The story would, of course, rouse another storm of indignation against himself, but there was no help for that. On the whole, he had bettered his chances and enhanced his temporary safety by giving the *Sphere* a start of twenty minutes or half an hour in its race against competing newspapers.

His shadow was nowhere in sight as he emerged from the building. Either the man's suspicions had been disarmed by the Phantom's move, or else he had

grown tired of waiting and dropped into a near-by restaurant for a bite of food. Standing at the curb, the Phantom glanced stealthily to right and left. There was no sign of espionage in either direction. At last he was free to begin his search for Helen Hardwick, but the trail seemed to have neither beginning nor end. In vain he searched his mind for a starting point.

His hands were in his pockets, and presently his absently groping fingers touched a piece of paper. He drew it out, starting as his eyes fell on the ducal coronet.

"Guess I'll see Granger," he reflected. "I have a strong hunch he is my starting point."

CHAPTER XIX

THE BIG STORY

"HOW is your guest, Peng Yuen?" was the Phantom's first question after entering the shop on Pell Street.

The Chinaman's eyes widened. "The guest? Ah, yes, I remember. I think the gentleman is well."

"Has he telephoned anyone, or sent out any messages?"

"No; he has remained in his room all the time. He asked me this morning for something to read, and I gave him a translation of 'Chin-Kong-Ching.' "

"Good. I have come to have a talk with him."

"Very well." The slight figure, arrayed in loose-fitting, straw-colored garments, stepped to the wall with the softly gliding gait characteristic of his race. He pressed a button, and the Phantom passed through an opening which instantly closed behind him.

Granger, lying on a couch, looked up drowsily. The little room had neither windows nor visible door. Air was wafted in through a mysterious recess in a corner of the ceiling, and a shaded lamp shed a greenish light over the scene. The walls were covered with yellow satin embroidered with quotations from Chinese philosophers. On a table standing near the couch were the remnants of a breakfast.

"Fairly comfortable, I see." The Phantom sat down. His glance, though seemingly casual, was

taking in every detail of the reporter's appearance. "How are you feeling?"

"Rotten!" Granger rubbed his eyes and scowled disgustedly. "I asked the chink for something to drink, and he brought me a mess that tasted like vinegar and molasses. Then I dropped a hint that I would like some reading matter, and he handed me a book that put me to sleep before I had turned the first page. Say, how much longer are you going to sport my clothes and wear my name?"

"No longer than I have to. Your name suits me well enough, but our tastes in clothes differ."

Granger grinned. He was comfortably stretched out on his back and his eyes were lazily studying the arabesques in the ceiling.

"Anyhow, my clothes are harmless. That's more than can be said for my name. On the square, I am surprised to see you this morning."

"Why so?"

There was a twinkle in the reporter's eyes as he turned them on the Phantom. "Because you went in for a lot of trouble when you annexed my identity. I was pickled last night, and you took my breath away when you yanked off the mustache. Till then I hadn't had the faintest idea that my abductor was the Gray Phantom. If I hadn't been so flabbergasted I might have given you a friendly tip."

"A tip?"

"To the effect that Tommie Granger was a marked man. I'll tell you something interesting if you promise not to fall out of the chair. I am a member of the Duke's gang."

The Phantom's brows went up. For several hours he had been aware of Granger's membership in the criminal organization, but the glib admission surprised him. He had intended to pull the Duke's

communication out of his pocket with a dramatic gesture and startle a confession out of the reporter; and he was wholly unprepared for the latter's frank and voluntary avowal.

"Surprised you, didn't it?" Granger chuckled as if mildly amused. "I can hardly get used to the idea myself. Membership in that gang of cutthroats and grafters is nothing to be proud of, exactly. I've always had a sneaking admiration for the Gray Phantom, but the Duke's different. He's smooth and artful enough, but he's made of coarser stuff."

"Yet you are a member of his organization?"

"Sounds contradictory, doesn't it? Well, since I have told you the beginning, I'll have to tell you the rest. The cause of it all dates back to my birth. I came into the world with the face I'm wearing to-day, though it's undergone a process of beautification in the intervening years. You see, my face is the mainspring that has determined most of my actions in recent years—some of the more important ones, anyhow. I wouldn't be a newspaper man to-day if I had been born with a different face."

"I don't see the connection."

"Let me tell you how it came about. On seven different occasions, and in as many different places, I have been mistaken for the Gray Phantom and put in durance vile. The clippings in my scrapbook tell all about it. I was in Cheyenne, Wyoming, the first time it happened, and after I had satisfied the police dunderheads as to my identity, the editor of one of the local papers asked me to write up my impressions while in jail and tell how it felt to be mistaken for a celebrity like the Gray Phantom. I did, and that gave me a taste for newspaper work. The editor gave me a job on the spot and I've——"

"But what has all this to do with your member-

ship in the Duke's gang?" interrupted the Phantom impatiently.

"Everything. I've been plugging away at the newspaper game ever since I got my start in Cheyenne. I never stayed long in a place, for I have something of a roving disposition and like change of scenery now and then. My face got me in bad almost wherever I went. I had no sooner struck a new town than some ambitious dick thought he saw a chance to get famous by pinching the Gray Phantom. Of course, that always meant a stretch in the lock-up—anything from two days to a week. I used to lie awake nights imagining that I was in reality the Gray Phantom and dreaming of great criminal exploits. That got me interested in crime and criminals, and I began making a study of the subject.

"Finally, I drifted into New York and landed on the *Sphere*. One night while prowling about the Chatham Square section I dropped into a Turkish coffee house. It was a low joint, a hangout for thugs and thieves. While sipping my coffee I made a study of the different types around me. One fellow interested me in particular. He was an evil-looking cuss, but there was something about him that fascinated me. He looked something like a Stevensonian pirate, and he had a great scar over his left eye. Presently I began to notice that he was looking my way now and then, and finally I motioned to him to come and sit beside me. We talked in whispers, like everybody else in the joint, and by and by he asked me if I was not the Gray Phantom.

"He seemed disappointed when I told him I was only the Phantom's double. We talked on for a while, and the next night we met again in the same place. The fellow piqued my curiosity, and I tried to draw him out whenever I had a chance. I knew

he would shut up like a clam if I told him my profession, so I let him think I was a crook, though I didn't go into details. We met night after night, and each time we were more confidential. I could tell he had something on his mind that he didn't know just how to put into words, and of course, I did my best to lead him on. He approached the subject by slow and easy stages, dropping a cautious hint now and then. Finally, when he had convinced himself that I was to be trusted, he told me he belonged to a big criminal band and asked me if I would like to join."

"So that's how you happened to become a member of the Duke's organization?" observed the Phantom.

"To cut a long story short, that was the way it happened. I thought I could work the salamander stunt—play with fire without getting burned. The idea of getting on the inside of a big gang of crooks and studying its members at close quarters appealed to me. Aside from that, I saw a chance to turn up a big story for my paper, for it was my intention to get the goods on the gang and, eventually, hand it over to the police. But"—and a rueful smile wrinkled Granger's face—"I soon discovered that one can't play with fire without getting scorched."

"That explains," mumbled the Phantom thoughtfully, at the same time extending the communication handed him by the Duke's messenger. "There's a message worked into the design which is readable only under the lens. It's a pleasant reminder of what happens to traitors."

"Yes. I know. I received several such reminders before you came along and borrowed my clothes and name. I wasn't really a traitor, though. I merely refused to obey certain orders they gave me."

"You might have known that you would be expected to take part in the gang's activities. You didn't expect to be a member only in name?"

"Well, I thought I could stall for a while, till I got the dope I wanted. You see, I was hoping they wouldn't ask me to do any of the rough stuff till I had been a member for a while. I soon discovered my mistake."

"And so the big story will never materialize?"

"I'm afraid it won't. My obituary is the only kind of story that's likely to grow out of this adventure of mine. The Duke's crew doesn't stand for any nonsense. I've been told that members who don't obey orders usually disappear under mysterious circumstances. I never got next to the inner circle of the gang. I suppose they didn't trust me because I took a drink too many now and then. Anyhow, I didn't get the stuff I was after. I was a sort of probationer, reporting to one of the big chief's lieutenants, and I didn't get as much as a glimpse of the inner sanctum."

"Too bad, Granger." The disappointment written on the reporter's face seemed so ludicrous that the Phantom could not repress a smile. "Maybe it isn't too late yet. By the way," starting suddenly from his chair, "have you any idea where Helen Hardwick is?"

For a moment or two the reporter lay rigid on his back; then he jumped up and stared in dumfounded amazement at the Phantom.

"Why do you ask?" he inquired hoarsely, after a pause during which each man looked the other straight in the eye.

"Answer my question and I'll tell you my reason for asking it."

Granger swallowed hard. "Has anything happened to Miss Hardwick?"

"She has disappeared. Left her home two days ago and hasn't been heard from since. Her father has asked the police to search for her."

"Good Lord!" Granger groaned. "This is awful!"

The Phantom gripped his arm. "Tell me what you know," he commanded. "Your looks show that you are not entirely ignorant of the matter."

The reporter's face twitched. "I can guess what's happened to her," he declared, speaking in thick accents, "but I haven't the least idea where she is."

"Well, what do you think has happened to her?"

"She's been kid—kidnaped." As if to steady his nerves, Granger picked up a cigarette and lighted it.

"How do you know that?"

"Because I"—Granger drew in a whiff of smoke —"because I know the Duke's crowd wanted her abducted. They asked me to do it, and I balked. I couldn't—well, it simply went against the grain to do a thing like that. It was my refusal to do as they told me that got me in bad with the gang."

The Phantom's blood was slowly receding from his face. For a moment he sat rigid, lips tightly compressed, as if stunned. "Why did the Duke's crowd want Miss Hardwick kidnaped?"

"That I can't tell you. The leaders simply issue orders; they never explain their motives. I haven't the faintest idea what their reason for abducting Miss Hardwick could be."

Silence fell between them. The Phantom's steely gaze continued to search the other's face. Though evidently shocked by the news of Miss Hardwick's disappearance, the reporter did not once lower his eyes.

"They must have got somebody else to do it after I refused," he muttered, slowly getting a grip on himself. "Wish I had a drink."

The Phantom was hardly listening. His knitted brows told that his mind was struggling with a problem.

"Know an officer named Pinto?" he asked abruptly.

"I think I've heard of him."

The Phantom gave a brief summary of his adventures since arriving in the city. Granger listened attentively, his eyes expressing a mingling of astonishment and admiration. They opened wide as the narrator described the scene in the storeroom and Pinto's peculiar behavior, and he chuckled appreciatively at the account of the impostor's visit to the *Sphere* office.

"That's the Phantom all over!" he remarked when the story was finished. "It's the nerviest thing I ever heard of. But what you have told me only puts a few extra kinks in the mystery."

The Phantom nodded thoughtfully. "How well do you know Miss Hardwick?"

"Scarcely at all. I have never met her. She called me up at the *Sphere* office the day after the murder and asked me a lot of questions. I referred her to Doctor Bimble."

"So she told me."

"Bimble is a nut, but he has done several brilliant things along lines of criminology. I was busy the day Miss Hardwick called me up, and I got a little jolt when she told me her name. The thing was natural enough, of course, but it seemed a bit weird to be talking to the person I had been asked to kidnap. Well, I thought the easiest way to dispose of her was to suggest that she see Bimble."

The Phantom looked puzzled. "You never saw Miss Hardwick, and you have talked with her only over the telephone," he murmured. "That being the case, I wonder why Pinto asked me, while we were in the storeroom this morning, if I knew what had become of Miss Hardwick."

"Rumor has it that a romantic attachment exists between Miss Hardwick and the Gray Phantom. Pinto must have heard something about it."

"But at the time he put the question he had not the faintest idea that I was the Gray Phantom. He still thought I was Thomas Granger. It was my way of responding to the question that aroused his suspicions. Now, he must have had some reason for supposing that Thomas Granger knew something of what had happened to Miss Hardwick."

Granger considered. "Miss Hardwick may have told him about consulting me. But I think it just as likely that Pinto was playing a bit of clever strategy —that he had already suspected your identity and sprung that question about Miss Hardwick in the hope that you would betray yourself."

"Perhaps." The reporter's theory seemed so natural that the Phantom wondered why it had not occurred to him before. "If that was his purpose, the trick worked beautifully. Tell me, was it before or after the murder of Gage that the Duke's men came to you with the kidnaping proposition?"

Granger stared hard for an instant; then a glint of admiration appeared in his eyes. "Gray Phantom, you ought to have been a detective. That's as neat a piece of mental acrobatics as I've seen in many a day. The proposal came to me a few days before Gage was murdered."

"But the two plots might have been hatched simultaneously?"

"They might. I see what you are driving at. You think the two plots were related to a single object. Perhaps you are right."

"Granger, you don't think I murdered Gage?"

"No," after a long pause; "but neither can I tell you who did. You, of course, are going on the presumption that Pinto is the culprit."

The Phantom looked a trifle bewildered. The reporter had read his mind.

Granger chuckled. "I can see in which direction your mind is working. You think the bolted door and other circumstances prove that no one but Pinto could have committed the murder. You believe that after killing Gage he murdered the housekeeper in order to silence her. Pinto's queer conduct, especially the stunt he pulled off in the storeroom this morning, is sufficient proof, to your way of thinking, and you base your entire case on the guess that Pinto is a member of the Duke's gang."

"Don't you agree with me? I read between the lines of your stories in the *Sphere* that you did not share the generally accepted opinion."

Granger looked up quickly. "The devil you did! I didn't mean to air my private opinions. It must have been a subconscious process. To be perfectly frank, I don't know whether I agree with you or not. I have an idea of my own on the subject, but it's vague as yet. Maybe I'll tell you later."

The Phantom shrugged his shoulders. "The mystery of the murders doesn't interest me particularly just at present. Granger, if you were in my position, how would you go about finding Miss Hardwick?"

The reporter considered for a long time. "My first step would be to get in touch with the Duke's gang and try to ascertain where Miss Hardwick is being concealed. That's a large order, and you will

find it fairly exciting. The Duke, I've been told, hates you as he never hated anyone before, and he's almost as dangerous behind prison bars as outside. He froths at the mouth whenever he mentions your name to the other prisoners. Your borrowed personality won't give you a great deal of protection, for there are a lot of sharp-eyed men in the Duke's crowd, and, besides, you're in almost as great danger whether you appear as the Gray Phantom or as Tommie Granger."

The Phantom waved his hand deprecatingly. "I have considered all that. The question is, how am I to get in contact with the gang." He peered reflectively at the man on the couch; then an idea came to him. "How did the heads of the organization communicate with you? To whom did you report and from whom did you receive your orders?"

"From my acquaintance of the Turkish coffee house."

"The piratical-looking fellow?"

Granger nodded.

"How can I find him?"

"The coffee joint is in Catharine Street, not far from East Broadway. You can easily locate it, and you will probably find your man there about ten or eleven at night. But hadn't you better take me along?"

The Phantom shook his head emphatically. "You have just told me to what extremes you are willing to go in order to get a good story for your paper. The capture of the Gray Phantom would make an even bigger story than the one you were after. I can't quite trust you, Granger. You love your liquor not wisely but too well, and you're likely to give the show away. Besides, it wouldn't do for us two to be seen together."

"That's so," said Granger resignedly. "Well, anyhow, you might send me something for a bracer."

The Phantom promised to try. He got up and rapped on the wall, eyeing Granger steadily as he stepped through the opening that appeared as if by magic. But the reporter, evidently realizing that any attempt to escape would be useless, made no move.

An opium lamp was sizzling in a corner of the room. At a table sat Peng Yuen, his face as impassive as granite. If he had overheard any part of the conversation he showed no sign of it.

"You need food and sleep," he remarked tonelessly, pointing to the table, on which a meal was spread out.

The Phantom thanked him and sat down. He was famished and fagged out, and he could accomplish nothing until night came, so he gladly accepted the Chinaman's hospitality. As he ate, Peng Yuen regarded him stolidly while he smoked his acrid pipe of *li-un*. He did not speak until the Phantom had finished his meal.

" 'The Book of the Unknown Philosopher,' " he remarked, without looking directly at his guest, "says that the overwise sometimes go far afield in search of truths that may be found at home."

The Phantom looked up, bewildered. "I suppose there is a priceless gem of wisdom hidden somewhere in that sentence, but I don't see how it can apply to me."

The Chinaman gave a queer laugh, half chuckle and half grunt, and deep in the almond-shaped eyes lurked a faint, shrewd twinkle.

CHAPTER XX

THE MISSING SKELETONS

DUSK was falling as the Phantom, refreshed by Peng Yuen's excellent cooking and several hours of sound sleep, left the shop in Pell Street and cautiously picked his way through the reek and noise of the Chinese quarter. He still felt a twinge of apprehension whenever he thought of Helen Hardwick, but his nerves were steady once more, and he had the springy step and the clear, alert eye of the man who feels sure of his ability to meet any emergency.

His fears were allayed somewhat by the comforting thought that Helen was as capable and keen-witted as she was reckless and audacious. She was what the Phantom termed a thoroughbred. She had nerve, spirit, and subtlety, and on several occasions she had evinced an amazing capacity for handling a difficult situation. Besides, she had a robust vitality and an athletic physique that in no wise marred her womanly charms.

The Phantom walked slowly, turning the complex situation over in his mind, for it was still too early to go to the coffee house in Catharine Street. At a corner news stand he bought an evening paper, glancing at the headlines as he walked along. The murder of the housekeeper was given glaring prominence because of the general belief that it had been perpetrated by the Gray Phantom. The motives as-

cribed to him were somewhat sketchy, but the police seemed convinced that he was bent on a campaign of terror, and there was anxious speculation as to where his bloodstained hand would appear next. In the meantime, the search was being continued at fever heat, and the detective bureau expected to make an important announcement within a few hours.

The Phantom smiled as he read. He had expected that the death of the housekeeper would be charged to him, and he had drawn fortitude from the firm belief that in a short time he would prove his innocence.

The odd predicament in which Pinto had been found was described facetiously and at great length. The paper treated it as a mystery that might not be solved until the officer, who had been taken to a hospital suffering from a severe concussion of the brain, recovered consciousness. His partner in the droll situation had stubbornly refused to render any explanation, and was being held for investigation pending Pinto's recovery. He had an unsavory record, according to the police, and was known in the underworld as "Dan the Dope."

The Phantom was satisfied. From Dan the Dope he had nothing to fear, and Pinto, even if he were inclined to tell what he knew, would not be able to speak for some time. He was passably safe as far as the police were concerned, and a little extra caution and vigilance would checkmate the designs of the Duke's henchman. As far as he was able to tell, neither side suspected that the Gray Phantom was masquerading as Thomas Granger.

He had still more than an hour to while away, and a hazy thought in the back of his mind guided his steps in the direction of Doctor Bimble's house.

Everything seemed to indicate that Helen had disappeared shortly after leaving the anthropologist's laboratory, and he might be able to pick up some clew in the neighborhood that would help him to trace her movements. He looked about him cautiously as he walked along, surmising that the vicinity was being watched by spies of the Duke.

At the corner nearest the Bimble residence he turned into a cigar store and purchased a package of cigarettes. He loitered near the door while smoking one, amusing himself by studying the faces of the passers-by, and presently a tall, angular figure approached from the other end of the block. At a glimpse the Phantom had recognized the inscrutable features of Jerome, the anthropologist's servant. The man walked hurriedly, looking straight ahead, and in a few moments he was out of sight.

A vagrant impulse told the Phantom to start in pursuit of him and see whither he was bound, but he realized that he had no reason for doing so. He had sensed something mysterious about Bimble and his servant, but his interest in them was little more than an idle curiosity. If he had any suspicions at all, they were of the intangible and intuitive sort and afforded him no basis for action.

After a few minutes another figure appeared down the block, and the Phantom pressed close to the wall at his back. Even at a distance he recognized the enormous head, the jutting stomach, and the absurdly thin legs of Doctor Bimble. With a beatific smile on his face, and looking neither to right nor left, the anthropologist walked past him, evidently bound in the same direction as his servant.

Again the Phantom felt an instinctive urge to follow. It struck him as rather queer that master and servant had not come out together, but then he

told himself that the circumstance was probably meaningless and that his imagination was magnifying trifles. He crossed to the opposite side of the street and turned east, scanning the dark front of the Bimble house as he strolled along.

Coming directly opposite the residence, he paused in the doorway of a delicatessen store and looked across the street, scrutinizing the gloomy and unprepossessing dwelling with an interest for which he could not account. It seemed strange that Doctor Bimble should have chosen such an unattractive location, but he remembered that the scientist had said something about wishing to live in an out-of-the-way place where he would be safe against intrusions on his privacy and where he could conduct his researches in peace and quiet.

The house, flanked by a lodging house on one side and on the other by a three-story structure of residential appearance, whose boarded-up windows and doors hinted that it had stood vacant for some time, was dark from attic to basement. Presumably Doctor Bimble and his man were out for the evening. The house and its neighbors on each side held the Phantom's gaze with a persistence that he could not understand. He sensed an incongruity of some kind, and for a while he tried in vain to analyze it. Finally, as he centered his attention on the building to the west, the one with the boarded windows and doors, it came to him. It seemed strange that a structure of that kind should be standing vacant in the midst of a housing famine, when even the least desirable dwellings commanded extravagant prices.

The Phantom laughed, a little disgusted with himself for allowing another meaningless trifle to perplex him. As likely as not the house was vacant for the simple and sufficient reason that it had been con-

demned by the building commissioner. His gaze wandered to the door of the Bimble residence, and a disturbing thought caused the chuckle to die in his throat.

Only the other day Helen Hardwick had walked out of that door, he remembered, and from that moment on her movements were veiled behind a curtain of mystery. Which way had she turned, what had happened to her, and where was she now? Had she been forcibly abducted as she stepped from the house, or had someone lured her into a trap?

There had been nothing about her disappearance in the newspaper the Phantom had just read, and he surmised that Mr. Hardwick had used what influence he had to keep the matter out of the press. The door across the street still held his gaze; and of a sudden, out of the jumble of his fears and perplexities, came another harassing thought.

What if Helen had never walked out of the door across the way? What if she should still be inside the house?

The Phantom's eyes narrowed as the suspicion came to him. It was groundless, so far as he could see, and there was no reasoning behind it. It had come out of nowhere, like a stray figment of the imagination, yet it tormented him with an insistence that he could not shake off.

He walked to the end of the block, then crossed the street and moved up the side on which the Bimble house stood. There were a few pedestrians in the street, and to attempt to force the main door might prove unsafe. The basement entrance was dark, and in a moment, concealed by the shadows, he was at work on the lock. It yielded so easily to his deft manipulation that he could understand how the

prowlers of whom Bimble had complained had managed to enter the house.

Pulling the door shut, he took out his electric flash, determined to settle his suspicions by making a systematic search of the house. He proceeded swiftly but with care, searching every nook and cranny and occasionally tapping the walls and floors to make sure there were no hollow spaces. He explored cellar and basement without finding anything of suggestive nature, then walked up the same stairway he had ascended after his first trip through the tunnel.

He was now in the laboratory, sweeping floor and walls with the electric torch. At first glance it looked exactly as it had when Helen met him at the head of the stairs with a leveled pistol, yet he sensed a difference almost at once. His eyes flitted over the long workbench with its collection of chemical apparatus, over the black-framed photographs and X-ray prints, and then he glanced at the tall cages along the wall, in which the skeletons stood, erect and grim as ghostly sentinels.

It was then his mind grasped the difference. On his first visit there had been at least a dozen skeletons in the room; now he counted only seven. The famous Raschenell, to whom Bimble had pointed with so much pride, was among the missing ones. He paused only for a moment to wonder what had become of the others, for Bimble and the servant might return at any time and interrupt his search, and he wished to be at the Turkish coffee house not later than half past ten.

He inspected room after room, but without result, finally mounting to the attic and making the same thorough investigation there. He had found noth-

ing whatever to reward him for his efforts. He came to the conclusion that his suspicions had been entirely unfounded, for if they had had any basis in fact his investigation would have uncovered some clew or hint pointing in that direction. One thing had been accomplished, however, was his reflection as he walked down the stairs. He had eliminated Doctor Bimble from the range of his suspicions and would waste no more time and effort trying to explain the eccentricities of a scientist.

Deciding to leave the way he had entered, he crossed the laboratory and moved toward the stairs. With his hand on the doorknob, he looked back and once more let his electric torch play over the floor and walls. Again, without exactly knowing why, he counted the cages, vaguely feeling that there was a hidden significance in the depletion of the grisly company.

Finally, he extinguished his flash and resolutely turned away. Again he was berating himself for bothering his mind over trivial things. Doubtless Doctor Bimble had a sound and simple reason for removing a number of the skeletons. As he walked down the basement stairs he resolved to banish the anthropologist and his collection from his thoughts.

An odd sense of apprehension took hold of him as he reached the bottom step. He looked about him sharply; the darkness was so thick that he could see nothing. He pricked up his ears and listened, but he could detect no sound except those coming from the street. Yet he had a feeling that he was not alone, that another being was lurking somewhere in the darkness. It was a familiar sensation and he had learned to heed its warning, for he had experienced it before in moments of danger.

He stepped down on the floor, at the same instant

reaching for the pistol he had taken from Dan the Dope. Before he could draw the weapon a voice spoke sharply:

"Stay right where you are, friend!"

Then a click sounded, followed by a blaze of light. He turned quickly in the direction whence the voice had come. He saw the glint of a pistol barrel pointed toward him with a steady hand, and behind the pistol stood Lieutenant Culligore.

CHAPTER XXI

FINGER PRINTS

THE detective's face was as dull and unimpassioned as a caricature carved out of wood. He stood pointing the pistol with a listless air, and his eyes were heavy and sluggish, as if he were not fully awake. He lowered the weapon almost as soon as he saw the Phantom's face, but did not put it out of sight.

"Oh, it's you, Granger." He spoke in a drawl, and there might have been the faintest trace of disappointment in his tones. "I thought it might be someone else."

"The Gray Phantom, for instance?"

"Well, maybe. There's no reason, though, why the Phantom should be prowling around here, is there?"

"Apparently not." The Phantom advanced leisurely and looked sharply at the speaker's stolid face. The question had been spoken in a tone faintly suggestive of an underlying meaning. "It seems both of us are taking advantage of the absence of Doctor Bimble and Jerome to do a little investigating on the quiet."

Culligore yawned ostentatiously. "The doc ought to have new locks put on his doors. It's too easy for people to get in."

"He is a simple and unsuspecting soul. But tell

me, lieutenant, how it happens that the Phantom's trail leads into Doctor Bimble's basement."

"Does it?"

"Well, I don't suppose you would be here unless it did. Your object in coming here wasn't to interview the skeletons upstairs, was it?"

Culligore laughed softly. "I might put the same question to you."

"Then we're on an even footing. And, since we don't seem to get anywhere, we might as well drop the subject of our mutual presence here. Each of us can take it for granted that the other has a tip which he wants to keep to himself. Seen anything of the Gray Phantom lately?"

"Not exactly."

"What's the idea of the 'exactly'? You either have seen him or you haven't seen him. Which is it?' '

"Neither the one nor the other," said Culligore mysteriously. "With a man like the Phantom you can never be sure. Even when you think you see him, he isn't always there. Say that was a queer case you tipped me off on this morning."

"It was. Simple enough, though, as far as the murder of the housekeeper is concerned. Apparently there's not the slightest doubt that the Phantom did it."

"Think so?"

The two words, spoken in low and casual tones, caused the Phantom to raise his brows. "Don't you?"

Culligore tilted his head to one side and squinted vacantly into space. "Things aren't always what they seem," he drawlingly observed. "I've been seesawing up and down ever since I was turned loose

on this case. One hour I feel dead sure the Phantom did it; the next I don't know what to think."

"All the facts seem to point to the Phantom's guilt."

"That's just the trouble." Culligore scowled a little. "There's such a thing as having too many facts. If the evidence wasn't so perfect I'd be more sure of my ground. As it is, I wouldn't bet more than a pair of Bowery spats on the Phantom's guilt. I'm not sure he killed either Gage or the housekeeper."

The Phantom eyed him intently, trying to read his mind.

"I see," he murmured. "You don't want to believe the Phantom has fallen so low as to——"

"You're talking rot!" snorted the lieutenant, as if touched on a sensitive spot. "What I want to believe makes no difference. If I could lay my hands on the Phantom this minute, I'd put the links on him so quick it would take his breath away. Even if he didn't kill Gage and Mrs. Trippe, there are one or two other things we can send him up for."

"I suppose so," said the Phantom thoughtfully. "Much as you would hate to pinch him, you can't let sentiment interfere with duty."

"Sentiment be damned!" grumbled the lieutenant, reddening a trifle as he saw the knowing grin on the Phantom's face. "I never was long on that kind of stuff. By the way, what's your opinion of the case, Granger?"

"I haven't any." The Phantom wondered what was going on in the back of Culligore's mind. He knew the dull features were a mask and that the lieutenant, practicing a trick cultivated by members of his profession, was studying his face every mo-

ment without appearing to do so. "You seem to be holding something back," he added.

"Think so?" Culligore uttered a flat, toneless chuckle. "Aren't you holding something back yourself? What's the use trying to hog it all for your paper?"

"Didn't I tip you off on the doings in the Gage house this morning?"

"You did," said Culligore dryly, "and I'm still wondering how you knew about them. Did you just walk in on a hunch and discover a dead woman, and a cop chained to an opium-eating runt, or did someone put you wise beforehand?"

The Phantom felt he was on dangerous ground. "It was only a hunch. We newspaper men have them, you know, and once in a while they pan out. But what do you make of it, Culligore? How do you explain the cop being handcuffed to Dan the Dope?"

"I don't explain it. I suppose Pinto will tell us how it happened when he comes to."

"Think there's any connection between the handcuffed pair and the murder of the housekeeper?"

"How could there be? The medical examiner said the housekeeper must have been dead from twenty to thirty hours when the body was found. Besides, where do you find any connection between a murder on the one hand and a cop chained to a dope fiend on the other? To my way of thinking, the two cases are separate. The one of Pinto and Dan the Dope is all a riddle, and the only clear thing about it is that the Phantom had a hand in it."

"The Phantom?"

"Yep. The Phantom was in on it. Surprised, eh? Well, there are some things we don't tell the newspapers, and this was one of them. Just how the

Phantom figured in the thing I can't tell, but he was in the Gage house last night or early in the morning. Beats the dickens how that fellow can walk past our noses without getting caught."

The Phantom stared. He did not think he had left any traces of his connection with the affair at the Gage house, and Culligore's statement startled him for a moment.

"How do you know?" he asked, getting a grip on himself.

"Finger prints," said the lieutenant. "This is on the q. t. I examined the handcuffs, and there were three sets of prints on them, showing that three different persons had handled them. There were only two or three marks of each set, but enough to identify them. One set was Dan the Dope's, the other must have been Pinto's, and the third was the Gray Phantom's."

The Phantom bit his lip, chiding himself for having been caught off his guard. He might have known that the smooth and shiny surface of the handcuffs would register finger prints, but he had been bodily and mentally exhausted at the time, and his habitual sense of caution had failed to assert itself.

"Wonder what the Phantom was up to," he murmured, feeling a trifle uncomfortable beneath Culligore's covert and incessant scrutiny.

"Hard telling. Lots of queer things happen in this world." Culligore grinned while absently toying with the pistol. "For instance, this morning after I left you on the corner——"

"You had me shadowed," interrupted the Phantom. "What was the idea, Culligore?"

"Just a hunch. My man trailed you to the *Sphere* office. Then, thinking you wouldn't be out for a

while, he went into a beanery for a bite and a cup of coffee. After coming out he hung around the entrance to the *Sphere* Building for a while longer, but you didn't show up. Finally, he went inside and inquired for you. They told him you had left."

Culligore paused for a moment. He was turning the pistol in his hand with a playful air. The Phantom felt a curious tension taking hold of his body.

"They told my man," continued the lieutenant, speaking very softly, "that you didn't write the story yourself, but told the facts to a reporter named Fessenden. As I understand it, they gave Fessenden a new desk not long ago. It's a nice-looking piece of furniture, with a smooth, glossy finish. Maybe you noticed it?"

"No, not particularly," said the Phantom, finding it a little hard to keep his voice steady. The rôle he was playing had claimed all his thoughts while he was in the *Sphere* office, and he had not noticed details.

"Too bad you didn't." Culligore was still speaking in low, purring accents. Gradually and without apparent intent, he turned the muzzle of the pistol until it pointed to the Phantom's chest. "Well, I understand Fessenden was sitting at that nice, new desk while you told him the story, and you were sitting right beside him, with one of the corners of the desk toward you. Some people have a habit when nervous of drumming with their fingers on whatever object is before them. It's a bad habit, Granger."

The Phantom nodded. A thin smile played about his lips and his eyes glittered like tiny points of steel between half-closed lids.

"Very bad habit, Granger. Well, my man saw finger prints on the smooth and shiny surface of the

'desk, right where you had been sitting. He touched them up by sprinkling a little gray powder over them, after which they were photographed. It 'didn't take very long to identify them. Steady now! This little toy of mine can be real ugly when it gets mad. What I want you to explain is how Tommie Granger's fingers happened to leave the Gray Phantom's finger prints on Fessenden's desk."

CHAPTER XXII

THE PHANTOM TURNS A SOMERSAULT

THERE was a humorous glint in Lieutenant Culligore's lazy, mouse-colored eyes as he noted the look of consternation that was slowly creeping into the Gray Phantom's face. He drew a step nearer, and now the menacing muzzle was less than six feet from its target. There was a touch of carelessness in his manner of handling the weapon, but his aim was sure and a slight pressure on the trigger would have meant death.

But the Phantom's look of dismay was not due to fear. Many a time he had laughed in the face of dangers far more serious than the present one. The thing that appalled him was the realization that twice within a few hours he had committed a stupid blunder. The Gray Phantom, once the astutest and craftiest of rogues, had bungled like an amateur.

The thought was galling. Was it that his hand had lost its old-time finesse and his mind its keen edge, or had his mental stress and fagged nerves been the cause of his bungling? Again, perhaps he had been distracted by the haunting vision of a pair of troubled brown eyes.

He looked hard at Culligore. Some faces were like an open book to him, and this was one of them. The lieutenant was no man's fool. Behind the mask of dullness and stolidity were shrewdness and quickness of wit, and he knew that the man before him

would not permit private inclinations to swerve him from his duty. Culligore was as dangerous an adversary as he had ever faced. But there was still another quality behind the mask, and it was this that gave the Phantom his cue.

Quickly he looked about him. The way to the basement door was barred by the lieutenant, but the stairway leading to the laboratory was unobstructed. With an appearance of utmost unconcern the Phantom turned away and started to ascend the steps.

"Stop!" commanded Culligore, following the retreating man's movements with his pistol. "I'll pop you if you take another step."

The Phantom stopped, turned, and grinned. "Oh, no, you won't," he drawled.

"Can't you see that I've got you covered?"

"But you won't shoot. It takes a particular kind of nerve to kill a defenseless man in cold blood, and you haven't got it. Good-by."

He took another step, but a short and peremptory "Halt!" brought him to a stop. There was something in the lieutenant's tone that gave him pause. He turned and looked down.

"You've sized me up just about right," admitted Culligore. "I can't kill a man who hasn't got a chance for his life. But if you move another step, you'll get a slug of lead in your leg. If you think I'm bluffing, just try."

The Phantom hesitated. The words and the tone left no room for doubt as to the speaker's earnestness, and even a slight flesh wound would hamper the Phantom's movements and frustrate his plans. He came down the few steps he had covered and stood on the basement floor.

"All right, Culligore. You win this time, but don't think for a moment that I'll let you carry this

joke much further. I have very strenuous objections to being arrested at this particular time. Mind if I smoke a cigarette?"

"I do," the lieutenant said dryly. "I have heard about your cute little ways, and I'm not taking any chances. You don't play any of your tricks on me, Mr. Phantom."

"You surely don't think that I'll permit you to drag me off to a cell?"

"How are you going to help yourself?"

"Why, man, it can't be done! It's been tried before, you know. And just now I am a very busy man and can't afford to waste time. Besides, what charge do you propose to arrest me on? Not the murder of Gage and Mrs. Trippe?"

"There are other charges waiting for you in court. You've been having a gay time for a good many years, but this is the end of it. You've done some very fancy wriggling in the past, but you can't wriggle out of this."

"Perhaps not." A great gloom seemed suddenly to fall over the Phantom. "It looks as though you had me, Culligore. A man can't fight the whole New York police force single-handed. All you have to do is to blow your whistle and——"

"Whistle be hanged! I'm not going to give you the satisfaction of saying that it took a regiment to get you. I mean to arrest you alone, just to prove that you're not as smart as some people think."

The Phantom glowed inwardly. His adroit and subtle appeal to the lieutenant's pride had produced the desired effect. Culligore felt so sure of his advantage that he would not summon help, and this was an important point in the Phantom's favor. Yet he knew the situation was critical enough. On former occasions he had gambled recklessly with

death, often winning through sheer fearlessness and audacity, but much more than his life was at stake now. He looked in vain for a loophole in the situation. All he could do for the present was to spar for time.

"I see," he murmured. "The achievement of taking the Phantom single-handed would put a gorgeous feather in your cap. But look here, Culligore. Fame is a fine thing, but you can't eat it, and it won't buy clothes. Isn't it just as important to find the murderer of Mrs. Trippe and Gage?"

"I'll attend to that, too." The lieutenant inserted a hand in his pocket and drew out a pair of handcuffs. "Out with your hands, Phantom."

The Phantom promptly put his hands in the pockets of his trousers. "Why be in such a rush, Culligore? You know I can't get away from you so long as you keep me covered. Let's discuss things a bit. You don't think I committed those murders?"

"Not exactly," said the detective thoughtfully, the steel links dangling from his hand. "Whatever else you may be, I don't think you're a murderer."

"And that shows that you have more gray matter than some of your colleagues."

"Thanks," dryly; "but you'd better save the compliments. I haven't quite made up my mind about the murders yet. If you didn't commit them, there are a lot of things that will have to be explained. The threatening letter, for instance."

"Forged."

"And Gage's dying statement."

"Pinto lied, or else Gage was mistaken."

"Think so?" The lieutenant's upper lip brushed the tip of his nose. "It's a queer thing that nothing but the Maltese cross was taken."

"That was only a detail of the frame-up. Listen, Culligore. Isn't it your idea that the two murders were committed by one and the same person?"

"It looks that way, but——"

"Well, then, I happen to know who killed Mrs. Trippe, because I was there when it happened."

Culligore stared; and the Phantom knew he had gained another point.

"There when it happened? You saw the murder committed?" The lieutenant seemed at once amazed and incredulous. "Just where were you? In the storeroom?"

"No; the murder was committed in Gage's bedroom, and the body was afterward removed to the storeroom by the murderer."

For a moment Culligore's astonishment was so great that he almost forgot to maintain his aim. He gathered himself quickly, but his face bore a look of bewilderment.

"He moved the body, eh? I wonder why. If the job was done by a certain person I have in mind, I don't see what object he could have in carrying the corpse from Gage's bedroom to the storeroom. The natural thing would have been to leave the body on the spot. You're not kidding me?"

"Absolutely not." The Phantom grinned at Culligore's perplexity. Evidently the lieutenant's theories and calculations had been completely upset by what he had just heard. "Who is the certain person you had in mind, Culligore?"

"Never mind that. Let me get this straight. You were in Gage's bedroom when Mrs. Trippe was murdered?"

"Not in the bedroom, but—" The Phantom checked himself on the point of explaining that he had witnessed the murder from his place of conceal-

ment in the narrow opening back of the window frame. In a flash it dawned upon him that he had another advantage over the detective. He had found the loophole in the situation for which his mind had been searching for the past ten minutes. Culligore, of course, was not aware of the existence of the tunnel. The stairs leading to the cellar were at the Phantom's back. If he could elude the detective long enough to slip down the steps and crawl into the mouth of the tunnel, he would be temporarily safe. It was a slender chance, but he had no other.

"Where were you, then?" demanded Culligore.

"My secret." The Phantom assumed a mysterious expression, meanwhile edging ever so slightly toward the stairs at his back. "I saw Mrs. Trippe and she saw me. She was in a terribly frightened condition, and she called out that someone was killing her. Then, of a sudden, a hand appeared, holding a knife. Before I could utter a word or move a muscle, the knife had done its work."

Culligore muttered something under his breath. He scanned the Phantom's face keenly, but what he saw evidently convinced him of the narrator's truthfulness. A noise, scarcely louder than the falling of a pin, sounded at the head of the stairs. The Phantom's sensitive ears detected it, but the lieutenant appeared to have heard nothing.

"Well, what happened after that?"

The Phantom waited for a moment before he answered. A draft faint as a breath told him that the door at the top of the stairs had been opened. He had a vague impression that somebody was looking down on them, and he wondered whether Doctor Bimble or Jerome had returned. Not the slightest flicker in his face showed that he had noticed anything.

"I didn't see any more. The—the curtain fell a moment or two after the blow was struck."

Culligore regarded him narrowly. Another faint sound came from the head of the stairs, and in the same instant the draft ceased, indicating that the door had closed. The lieutenant, his every faculty bent to the task of ferreting out the thoughts in the Phantom's mind, had heard nothing. He seemed inclined to doubt and scoff, but a stronger instinct compelled him to give credence to the story he had just heard.

"And all you saw of the murderer was a hand and a knife?"

"That was all."

"Do you remember the woman's exact words?"

The Phantom searched his memory for a moment. "She said: 'He's killing me! He's afraid I'll tell! He locked me in——' She never finished the last sentence, but she had said enough. Evidently, the murderer of Gage knew that the housekeeper was aware of his guilt, and imprisoned her in the bedroom so that she would not reveal what she knew. Later he returned with a knife in his hand, having decided it would be safer to kill her. The housekeeper must have had some warning of his arrival; perhaps she saw or heard him coming."

Culligore looked as though he had a baffling problem on his mind. "Who do you suppose was the 'he' she referred to?"

"I think that's fairly plain. She had previously made it known that she suspected Pinto of having murdered her employer."

The lieutenant arched his brows and seemed to be revolving a new idea in his mind. "Just the same, we can't be sure she meant Pinto, as long as she didn't mention him by name. The fact that she

suspected him once doesn't really prove anything. Something may have happened in the meantime that caused her to change her opinion. The 'he' might have been an entirely different person—maybe somebody she'd never seen before and whose name she didn't know."

"Possible," admitted the Phantom thoughtfully. Culligore had turned his thoughts into a new channel.

"Besides," added Culligore quickly, "even if Pinto was the 'he' she had in mind, she might have been mistaken, just as you claim Gage was mistaken."

The Phantom made another slight movement toward the cellar stairs. "I'm not at all sure Gage made the statement Pinto claims he made. My private opinion is that Pinto is a liar as well as a murderer. What the housekeeper said isn't the only evidence I have against him. I hadn't meant to tell what happened in the storeroom this morning; but since I was careless enough to leave my finger prints on the handcuffs, I might as well come out with it."

Culligore's mouth opened wider and wider as the Phantom related what had occurred in the storeroom during the early morning hours. When the story was finished, he seemed stunned, and the dazed look in his eyes told the Phantom his chance had come.

For an instant he flexed his muscles for action, then executed a swift and nimble somersault that landed him on his feet in the middle of the stairs. A spiteful crack told that Culligore had fired his pistol, but the Phantom was already at the bottom of the stairway. Then he dashed across the floor toward the point where the mouth of the tunnel was. He ran his fingers over the wall in search of the hidden door, the ingenious arrangement of which he had previously noticed.

Culligore, momentarily taken aback by the Phantom's quick and unexpected move, was losing no time. Already he was scampering down the stairs in pursuit of the fugitive. The cellar was dark, save for the narrow shaft of light slanting down from the basement, and the Phantom heard him muttering to himself as he picked his way through the gloom.

After a few moments' search the Phantom's fingers found the tiny rift in the brick surface that marked the location of the door. Culligore, evidently hesitating to use his electric flash for fear of becoming a target for the Phantom's pistol, was scudding hither and thither at the opposite end of the cellar. The Phantom crawled into the opening, feet foremost, and softly pulled the door to, then lay on his back, chuckling gently to himself as he pictured the lieutenant's discomfiture.

He had no fear that Culligore would find his hiding place. The door was so carefully concealed that only a careful search would reveal its location, and the detective did not even suspect its existence. Yet the Phantom knew that he would not be safe for long. He could not remain in the tunnel indefinitely, and escape through the other end was impossible, for he had previously ascertained that the mechanism of the revolving window frame could not be manipulated from that side. All he had gained was time. He could only hope that his lucky star, which so far had never deserted him, would once more turn the situation in his favor.

His mind was working quickly while he listened to Culligore's movements in the cellar. Doubtless the detective would soon summon assistance and have the building surrounded, and then, unless some chance and unforeseen development came to his rescue, the Phantom's position would be critical in-

deed. Even if the searchers should not find his hiding place, he would eventually die from lack of air.

Suddenly his figure stiffened. He lay rigid, trying to account for the curious sensation that had just come to him. In a moment he knew what it was; a faint current of air was stirring in the tunnel. At first he could not understand, for he was certain that both exits were closed, and the tube itself was airtight. He worked deeper into the tunnel, trying to trace the mysterious current to its origin, and presently it came to him that, through some unaccountable circumstance, the other end must be open.

It was mystifying, but the stirring of air could be explained in no other way than that in some manner the revolving window frame had come open. He moved forward as rapidly as he could, hoping to gain the exit and get out of the zone of danger before the block was surrounded. By this time Culligore must have discovered that his quarry had in some inexplicable way escaped from the basement. Perhaps he was even now cursing himself for his vain-glorious boast that he would take the Gray Phantom single-handed and unaided.

The movement of air became more noticeable as the Phantom drew near the end of the passage. He proceeded more slowly now, moving forward by cautious twists and wrigglings, a few inches at a time, carefully calculating each motion so as to make no noise. There was something at once puzzling and ominous about the open exit, and he could not know what awaited him in the bedroom at the end of the tunnel.

His progress became more difficult as he reached the acclivity in which the passage terminated, for he had been moving crab fashion, having entered the tunnel feet first in order to be able to close the door

behind him, and the width of the tube did not permit him to turn. Silent as a mole, he twisted his body upward, all his senses on the alert against the slightest hint of danger. Now his feet were almost at the window frame. As he had surmised, the opening was clear, and a few more twists would land him on the floor of the bedroom.

Cautiously he thrust a foot through the opening, but in a moment he drew it back. Then he lay rigid, listening, for something warned him of danger. The bedchamber was dark and there was not the faintest sound; yet he knew someone was lying in wait for him on the other side.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE WATCHERS AT THE WINDOW

THE Phantom strained his ears. Faint sounds of breathing came to him; then a board creaked ever so slightly under someone's weight. A watcher—or were there two?—was standing just inside the window, guarding the exit. The discovery nettled him, for it meant the loss of precious seconds, but he thanked the warning instinct that had prompted him to muffle his movements. It had probably saved him from an unexpected attack in the dark.

Warily he reached for the pistol in his hip pocket. He was still listening, and now he was almost certain that two watchers were standing close to the window sill. Doubtless they were armed and ready to spring upon him the moment he betrayed himself, and his awkward position would make it extremely difficult for him to defend himself.

He turned the situation over in his mind while he waited. It had been a trap, of course. He remembered the slight sound that had told him of the opening of the door to the laboratory while he was fencing for time with Culligore. Someone had looked down on them from the head of the stairs, remaining there long enough to take in the situation and decide on a course of action. Doubtless he had suspected that the Phantom would make an attempt to reach the tunnel, his only avenue of escape, and

the plan had been to attack him as he came out of the passage.

Again a board gave forth a slight creak, signifying that one of the sentinels was growing impatient. The Phantom was in a cramped position and, with his feet above his head, he would be at a decided disadvantage in a fight. He could still use his pistol, but to do so would be dangerous, to say nothing of the difficulty of taking aim in the dark. He was still looking for a way out of the difficulty when one of the watchers at the window spoke in a whisper.

" 'Slim!' "

"Well?"

"Hear anything of him yet?"

"Not a sound. Suppose he shouldn't come out at all, 'Toots'?"

"What's in has got to come out. He'll come acrawlin' this way by 'n' by. Don't you worry."

The whispering voices were unrecognizable, and the names were not illuminating, but the Phantom did not think that the speakers were officers. More likely they were members of the Duke's band and had gained entrance to the house during the absence of Doctor Bimble and Jerome. It was even possible that they had trailed the Phantom to the anthropologist's residence.

Again the man named Toots spoke. "I don't like this job a little bit. The Phantom's a bad customer —a reg'lar devil."

"But we've got him this time. He'll come this way as soon as he notices the draft. He won't be suspectin' a thing, and all we've got to do is grab him. It'll be as easy as picking a banana out of the peeling."

Toots was silent for a time. Evidently he stood

in great awe of the Phantom. "What about the dick?"

"Oh, he's taken care of. The boss is handlin' him. No danger of him buttin' in on us."

The Phantom listened intently, but was barely able to distinguish the faint whispers. Slim's last remark was interesting. If Culligore had been attacked and overpowered while searching the cellar, then the Phantom was in no danger from the police just at present. His only immediate problem was how to deal with the two watchers.

"What's the lay, Slim?" Toots was asking. "Why is the big chief so all-fired anxious to get his mitts on the Phantom?"

"Orders from the Duke. There's a big job on, but only two or three are in the know of it. All you and me got to do, Toots, is to keep our mouths shut, ask no questions, and collect our little bit when the time comes. The boss will do the thinkin' part."

Again a silence fell between the watchers; then Toots asked: "Why don't one of us go to the other end and smoke him out? I'm gettin' tired of waitin'."

"What's eating you? Time's cheap, ain't it? The Phantom will come out when he gets ready."

Another pause ensued; then the inquisitive Toots asked another question. "What I don't get atall is how the 'skirt' figgers in the deal. Where does she come in, Slim?"

The Phantom held his breath to catch the answer.

"Search me. All I know is that the Phantom has a crush on her. I s'pose the boss thinks the Phantom will be easier to handle if he's got a grip on the moll."

"Where's the boss keepin' her?"

"Say, ask me somethin' easy. The boss don't tell me his secrets."

The Phantom felt a twinge of disappointment. Toots' question had given him hope of learning something about Helen's whereabouts, but Slim's answer had quickly dashed it.

"I'm dying for a smoke," he heard Toots whisper.

"Well, get back in the corner and have one. But don't make any noise, and be careful when you strike the match."

The Phantom heard Toots tiptoeing away from the window. Then came a faintly scratching sound as of a match being struck. A daring idea entered the Phantom's mind. For the time being the enemy's force was divided, and there was only one watcher at the window. He saw a chance—a slender and dubious one, but perhaps the only chance he would have—to get the upper hand of the sentinels.

Bracing his shoulders against the wall of the passage, he drew his electric flash from his pocket. His right hand was already gripping the pistol. Holding both in readiness for instant action, he pricked up his ears and listened. Sounds of breathing told him that Slim was standing a few inches from his feet, perhaps looking directly at him through the darkness. He had already decided that Slim was the more resourceful man of the two. If Slim could be put out of action, his difficulty would be more than half solved.

His finger touched the little button, and a shaft of light pierced the darkness. In the same instant a head was thrust into the opening. A pair of startled eyes stared at him for a moment—and in that brief space of time the Phantom acted. His foot

shot out, delivering a sharp blow in the region of the nose and eyes. With a cry of pain the man tottered back, blood streaming from his face.

The Phantom extinguished his flash and flung it through the opening. Toots, evidently wondering what had happened, was jabbering excitedly, but Slim gave no sound. With a swift and agile movement, the Phantom jerked himself forward, dropping his legs over the sill, and in another moment he was standing inside the room. He stooped, ran his fingers over the floor, and recovered the electric torch, then darted noiselessly to one side. A pistol shot sounded, followed by a sharp thud as the bullet hit the wall a few feet from where he stood.

He leaped silently across the floor. The brief flash emitted by the pistol had given him a glimpse of Slim at the opposite wall. Before the man could move, the butt of the Phantom's pistol had crashed down on his head. Uttering a feeble grunt, he sank limply to the floor, and in the same instant came another crack and flash, and a bullet whistled past the Phantom's head.

"You almost winged me that time, Toots," he remarked coolly, at the same moment dropping to his knees and noiselessly crawling toward where Toots stood with his back to the door. Another shot, fired at random, lighted up the room for a brief instant, giving him another glimpse of his adversary. Swiftly and without making the slightest sound, he advanced toward the door. Now he reached out a hand, fumbling for a moment in the darkness until he lightly touched one of Toots' shoes. With a swift and powerful motion he jerked the man's feet from under him.

The Phantom sprang to his feet and rushed out of the room, turning the key in the lock on the other

side. He paused for breath while he brushed some of the dirt from his clothes. He had vanquished his adversaries, but possibly the shots had been heard, and haste was necessary. He ran to the front of the store. The street outside was quiet and dimly lighted. Cautiously he opened the door and stepped out, casting a quick glance up and down the street.

He made a few rapid calculations as he walked to the corner. If Culligore had fallen into the clutches of the Duke's gang, as seemed likely from the remark dropped by Slim, then he was still reasonably safe so far as the police were concerned. Yet, for the first time in many years, the Phantom was haunted by misgivings. Each thought of Helen Hardwick burned itself into his mind, leaving a scar. The realization that the Duke's minions had her in their power was maddening. He felt an urge to find her at once and snatch her away from her jailers.

Yet, at almost every step, he was hampered by the designs of his enemies. There were traps and snares everywhere. He had just escaped from one of them, but another time he might not escape so easily, and what would become of Helen then?

He shuddered at the thought. His mind was as keen and his muscles as pliant as ever, but he was playing against overwhelming odds, and the mere thought of defeat was unbearable. To ask help of the police was out of the question. His old organization was scattered to the four corners of the earth. Wade, his former chief lieutenant and now his trusted friend, had grown too fat to be of much use, and to reach him would be difficult.

Suddenly he thought of Thomas Granger. The reporter's journalistic instincts, coupled with his fondness of strong drink, had given the Phantom the feeling that he was not to be trusted. Those two

qualities aside, he had rather liked the fellow. Granger had traits that appealed to him strongly. He reconsidered the question as he stood on the corner, glancing furtively in all directions to see whether he was being spied upon.

In a few moments his mind was made up. For Helen's sake he must seek assistance somewhere, and he was in no position to be squeamish about his choice. A glance at his watch told him that it was half past eleven. Pell Street was only a dozen short blocks away, and a brisk walk brought him to Peng Yuen's door.

The wooden-featured Chinaman scanned his face as he held the door open and bade him enter.

"There is fire in your eyes," he observed as he conducted his guest into the den. "Is it the little Lotus Bud who is troubling the Gray Phantom? The 'Book of the Unknown Philosopher' says——"

The Phantom interrupted him with a short laugh. "Peng Yuen, for a man who doesn't read the newspapers, you are surprisingly well informed. I have come to have a talk with my double."

The Chinaman regarded him stonily. Two incense sticks, burning before a hideous joss idol, filled the air with acrid fumes. Peng Yuen, sucking a bamboo pipe with gorgeous tassels, seemed to be turning over a question in his mind.

"I think your friend is sleeping," he said at length.

"Then wake him," directed the Phantom impatiently.

The Chinaman shrugged his shoulders and touched a button on the wall, then motioned the Phantom to enter. Granger was in bed, but he looked up gloomily and stretched himself. There was a litter of cigarette ends on the table, and torn

and crumpled newspapers were scattered over the floor.

"Hope you've brought me a drink," said Granger.

The Phantom shook his head. Then he sat down on the edge of the bed and fixed the reporter's face with a keen and minutely searching gaze, as if exploring the depths of his soul.

"What's the idea?" asked the reporter. "You look at me as if I were some kind of curiosity."

There was a faint hint of doubt in the Phantom's face, but it vanished soon.

"I think you will do," he declared. "There's just one quality in your face, Granger, that I can't quite analyze. It's a weakness of some kind—your craving for alcohol, perhaps. Anyway, I am willing to take a chance on it. You are going with me."

The reporter sat up, his face all eagerness.

"Wait," commanded the Phantom; "I want to be sure that we understand each other. I am making the biggest play of my career. I am going after the Duke's crowd. My primary object is to get Miss Hardwick out of their clutches. My secondary one is to put the whole gang of sneaks and cowards behind the bars, where they belong. If I succeed, it will be as great a sensation as the *Sphere* ever sprang. You are welcome to it, provided you accept the conditions."

"What are they?"

"I am very likely to get into trouble before the job is done. I may walk into the arms of the police, or into one of the traps set by the Duke. I may get shot, put in a dungeon, murdered, perhaps. You are to follow me at a safe distance wherever I go, never letting me out of your sight. If anything happens to me I want you to take up the search where

I left off. Above all else you are to get Miss Hardwick away from those ruffians. Do you agree?"

Impulsively, without a moment's hesitation, Granger put out his hand. The Phantom gripped it. As he held it for a moment, another look of doubt flickered across his face, but it was soon gone.

"Then get into your clothes," he directed; "or mine, rather. We might as well keep up the masquerade a while longer. I am just a shade safer when I am hiding behind your personality."

"But what about me?" inquired Granger, making a wry face.

"Give the dicks and bulls as wide a swath as you can. At worst, they can only pick you up again and take another impression of your finger prints, and you will have to explain why you have shed your gaudy feathers. If we have a bit of luck we'll pull off a stunt that the police won't forget in many a day. They'll be so busy explaining their own mistakes and blunders that they won't ask many questions."

He had found a whisk broom and was removing from his clothing some of the grime and dust he had gathered in the tunnel. He glanced impatiently at his watch, while Granger dressed with time-consuming care.

"Which way?" inquired the reporter.

"Do you suppose it's too late to find the coffee-house pirate?"

"Doubtful, but you might try. Sometimes he hangs around the Catharine Street joint till late."

"What's his name?"

"You might call him Matt Lunn. He has several names, and he isn't particular which one you use."

The Phantom considered. "Is he close to the inner circle of the gang? Does he share its secrets?"

"I think he does, but I wouldn't swear to it. Anyhow, he is a lot closer to the big chief than I ever got."

The Phantom scowled while Granger adjusted his tie. The reporter seemed almost as keen on sartorial polish as on journalistic attainments.

"By the way," inquired the Phantom, "who is the illustrious personage that's referred to as 'the big chief'?"

"He is the Duke's chief agent. I don't know his name, and I've never seen him. Through underground channels the Duke sends him orders from his cell in Sing Sing. The Duke is the brain that plans, and the big chief is the hand that executes. Say, I'm being consumed with curiosity. Aren't you going to tell me something of your plans?"

"I haven't anything definite. I shall go to the Catharine Street coffee house and try to cultivate the acquaintance of Mr. Matt Lunn. I mean to obtain certain items of information from him. Just how I shall go about obtaining them depends upon what sort of man I find him to be. We'll be on our way whenever you are through primping."

At last the reporter was ready. Peng Yuen was stolidly smoking his pipe as they passed out. The almond-shaped eyes narrowed a trifle as the Phantom shook his hand, and for an instant he seemed about to say something. In another moment he had changed his mind, however, and with a queer little grunt in his throat he went back to his green-tasseled pipe.

With a final admonition to exercise care and discretion, the Phantom left Granger outside the shop and walked rapidly toward Catharine Street. He had no reason for doubting the reporter's sincerity. Granger's moral stamina might not be all that could

be desired; but, on the whole, the Phantom was well pleased with the arrangement. It had already relieved him of much worry and enabled him to center his thoughts and efforts on the task before him.

He had no difficulty in finding the coffee house, a crumbling and evil-looking hovel squeezed between a sooty factory building and a squalid tenement. Lights shone dimly through several windows in the block, which had a gloomy and somewhat sinister appearance, and he was looked at sharply by several wretched creatures who passed him on the sidewalk. The window and glass door of the coffee house were covered with green paper blinds, but there was a narrow opening through which the Phantom could get a glimpse of the interior.

Some twelve or fifteen men were seated at long tables, drinking coffee and smoking pipes or cigarettes. The air was so heavy with tobacco fumes that the Phantom could not distinguish their features clearly, but he got the impression that they were a disreputable lot. He looked in vain for anyone answering the description Granger had given of Matt Lunn. He walked away from the window and stood at the curb, scanning the street in either direction. At a corner a block away, he saw a shadowy figure leaning against a stack of boxes outside a grocery.

"Granger is on the job," he mumbled.

Then he turned quickly just as a huge, raw-boned man appeared from the opposite direction and walked into the coffee house. The Phantom caught a glimpse of his face as he opened the door and passed through, and that glimpse revealed a great, livid scar over the left eye.

In an instant he knew that the man was Matt Lunn. A thin, audacious smile hovered about the Phantom's lips as recognition flashed through his

mind. For a moment he hesitated, casting a swift glance to the corner where Granger stood; then he crossed the sidewalk and resolutely pushed the door open.

A minute or two later, in a cheap, all-night lunch-room a block down the street, someone was impatiently jigging the hook of a telephone.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE FACE IN THE LIMOUSINE

TWELVE or more pairs of eyes looked up as the Phantom walked into the coffee house. They gave the newcomer a long, stony stare, followed his brisk progress across the floor to a table in the rear, then looked down again into coffee cups and pipe bowls, as if the new arrival had been completely forgotten.

With a view to obtaining an unobstructed view of Matt Lunn's face, the Phantom had chosen his position carefully. He wished to study the man before he approached him. A glance told him that Granger's description had been apt but incomplete. He was a wicked-looking creature, with coffee-brown complexion, eyes that were as hard and emotionless as bits of colored porcelain, and thick, coarse lips that were fixed in a perpetual sneer and gave him a look of sullen ferocity that was set off strikingly by the scar over his eye.

The Phantom noted these details and made his deductions while he gave his order to a gaunt, hunchbacked waiter. So far Lunn, who sat alone across an aisle between the tables, had not even looked in his direction and seemed totally unaware of his presence. The others, too, appeared to be ignoring him, but furtive glances and an occasional whisper warned the Phantom that he was under surveillance.

He sipped a little of the coffee that was brought him, shoved the cup aside and strolled across the aisle, seating himself opposite the man with the scar.

"Hello, Lunn," he said easily, imitating Granger's manner of speech. It was a convenient opening, even if he should not be able to deceive the man in regard to his identity.

Slowly the other lifted his flinty eyes, fixing a vacuous stare on the Phantom's face, and pulled hard at his pipe. "Hullo, yourself," was his gruff response.

"A bit grouchy to-night, Lunn?" bantered the Phantom, resuming his study of the man at closer range and confirming his previous suspicion that Matt Lunn was a bully with a coward's heart. A cranning of necks and lowering glances signified that the rest of the men in the room were following the conversation.

"You called me by a different name last time you saw me," grumbled Lunn suspiciously.

The Phantom masked his momentary confusion behind a grin. After all, he had scarcely hoped to fool Lunn, for the latter and Granger had been intimately acquainted for some time, and this was putting the ruse to the acid test.

"You've got so many monickers, Lunn, that I can't remember them all. Which particular one would you like to have me use to-night?"

"The same one you always used before, if you know which one that is."

Of a sudden the Phantom wished that Granger had given him more explicit information regarding Lunn. The man with the scar was plainly suspicious, and the Phantom was not yet quite ready for action.

"Tell me where I can connect with a drink," was

his jocular evasion, "or I'll call you a name you never heard before."

The other sneered. "There are some things that hurt a lot worse than names do. One of them is a knife in the side, and I've been told a fellow whose name is Tommie Granger is going to get just that unless he explains certain things to the big chief."

The Phantom's face sobered. "I'm ready to explain. That's why I looked you up to-night. But we can't talk in here. Suppose we take a walk around the block?"

Lunn laughed derisively. "I was referrin' to a guy named Tommie Granger. He looks a lot like you and he hands out pretty much the same kind of spiel, and yet I could tell the difference almost as soon as I put my lamps on you. Just the same, I'd as soon walk around the block with the Gray Phantom as with anybody else."

He spoke the last sentence in a whisper, accompanying the words with a grin that rendered his face all the more repellent. The Phantom cast a quick glance at the evil-looking faces at the other tables, wondering whether Lunn had any confederates in the room. They were the scum of the lower levels of the underworld, and their blotched and hardened features bespoke lives steeped in loathsome iniquities, but, unless there were members of the Duke's organization among them, the Phantom saw no reason why they should side against him.

He paid the hunchback and walked behind Lunn toward the door. Sullen and covert glances followed him, but none of the men rose, and he was permitted to reach the door without interference. He glanced back as he stepped out on the sidewalk and made sure that Lunn and himself were not being followed.

The man with the scar took a few steps down the street, then stopped and whirled round.

"What's the idea?" he demanded brusquely. "Why did you walk in there and try to pass yourself off as Tommie Granger?"

"Not so loud, Lunn." The Phantom glanced about him quickly. For the moment the block happened to be deserted. Lunn was standing with his back to the dark doorway of the factory building which adjoined the coffee house. There was a menacing scowl in his face and his right hand was hovering over one of his pockets.

Again the Phantom darted a quick glance up and down the street. The only person in sight was the lonely figure leaning against the stack of grocery boxes on the farther corner. Evidently Granger had not moved a single step from his post.

"I'm listening," said Lunn. "What's the answer?"

"This is your answer." With one hand the Phantom pinioned Lunn's arm; with the other he jerked his pistol from his pocket and pushed it against the other's waist, shoving him into the shelter of the doorway. Lunn, startled by the swift maneuver, gave a throaty squeal.

"Be quiet!" commanded the Phantom. "I have a few things to say to you, and I don't want any interruptions. I happen to know that you're a member of the Duke's gang. Your crowd is after me tooth and nail, and the reason you were so willing to take a walk with me was that you hoped to catch me off my guard and hand me over to your chief. You're a fool, Lunn. Cleverer men than you have tried that and failed. Feel that?"

He jabbed the pistol harder against the other's

waist, and a yawp of terror proved that he had read Lunn's character accurately. The big man, who would have been a dangerous adversary if he had gained the upper hand, was cowering.

"Now, Lunn," said the Phantom sharply, "a few quick answers may prolong your life by a good many years. Did you ever hear of a young lady named Miss Hardwick?"

"The name sounds kind of familiar."

"Don't stall! Miss Hardwick was kidnaped by members of the Duke's gang."

"Ye-es." Lunn gulped. "I—I think she was."

"You *know* she was. Don't you?" The question was emphasized with a little extra pressure on the pistol.

"I've been told the lady was kidnaped, but that's all I know. I didn't have anything to do with that job."

The Phantom regarded him sharply, but his face was indistinct in the gloom. "Who did?"

"I don't know; I never heard."

"Where was she taken?"

"I can't tell you that, either. Say, there's no use poking a hole through me with that gat. I can't tell what I don't know."

The Phantom was inclined to believe him. Evidently Granger had overestimated Lunn's store of inside information regarding the gang's activities.

"There's one thing you can tell me, and you had better speak quickly. Where does this precious gang hang out? Where is its headquarters?"

Lunn did not answer. He was breathing stertorously, and he uttered a groan or grunt whenever the pressure on the pistol was increased.

"Out with it!" The Phantom cast an uneasy glance behind him as he spoke, but no one was in

sight. "You'll never get out of here alive unless you tell."

The big fellow trembled. "I've sworn to keep my mouth shut."

"Well, I guess it wouldn't be the first time you have violated an oath. Where is the place?"

"Will you let me go if I tell you?"

An affirmative answer was on the Phantom's tongue, but he held it back. "No, Lunn, you are not going to get off quite so easily. You might give me a fictitious address, and I would have no way of verifying it until too late. You will have to take me there, and I sha'n't let you go until I have satisfied myself that it is the right place."

Lunn groaned; and the Phantom looked dubiously along the street. The words were no sooner out of his mouth than a sense of diffidence assailed him. To march an unwilling and treacherous guide through the streets would be a hard and perilous task even at that late hour. Then an idea came to him. He would signal Granger and instruct him to find a taxicab.

He turned slightly and looked out of the doorway, waving his hand at the solitary figure on the corner. In the next moment a short exclamation of surprise fell from his lips. A big black car was gliding down the street, slackening its pace as it drew nearer. The Phantom, still pressing the pistol firmly against Lunn's body, saw that it was a limousine, and he was at a loss to understand what a car of that type was doing in such a squalid neighborhood. Now it was crawling along very slowly, swerving close to the curb as it came within a few feet of the entrance to the coffee house. The driver was leaning from his seat, as if looking for someone.

Of a sudden a hoarse cry rose in the Phantom's

throat. Forgetting Lunn, he sprang from the doorway. A face had appeared at the window of the car—a white, rigid face with staring eyes and the look of death spread over its features.

The face was Helen Hardwick's.

CHAPTER XXV

IN A CIRCLE OF LIGHT

SHE looked as though her whole being had frozen into rigidity, and the glacial stare of her eyes sent a chill through the Phantom's veins. In a moment he was on the running board, wrenching the door open. He did not notice that the car gathered speed just as he tumbled in.

"Helen!" he cried, throwing himself into the seat beside her. "What's the matter? What has happened? Can't you speak?"

Her body swayed slightly with the motions of the car, but otherwise she did not stir. She sat erect and immobile, with her face turned stonily to the window, as if neither hearing nor seeing. He took one of her hands. It was cold, clammy, and limp. A groan broke from his lips.

Then, from a corner of the car, two shadows leaped upon him with a suddenness that dazed him. The pistol was still in his hand, but a stinging blow over the knuckles made him drop it to the floor. Helen Hardwick's face, terribly still, held him under a spell while his arms were twisted behind him and his wrists secured with a stout cord that bit into his flesh. Not until his legs had also been manacled did a glimmering of the truth force itself through his numbed senses; but even then he could think of nothing but the woman at his side.

"Is she—dead?" he asked.

Someone laughed. "Oh, no! She will come out of it presently. We needed a decoy, and she refused to accommodate us, so we gave her a hypodermic injection. It worked fine."

He braced his muscles as a vivid realization of what had happened flashed upon him, but the cords about his wrists and ankles held his limbs. Again he had walked into a trap, but for once he did not blame himself for his lack of caution. With eyes open he would have rushed into a thousand traps if Helen Hardwick was the bait. He glanced out of the window, noticing that the car was gliding swiftly through dark and deserted streets.

A hand reached out and pulled down the blind, cutting off the view. The car was making numerous turns, and he soon lost all sense of direction. The man's explanation of Helen Hardwick's condition had removed a crushing weight of horror from his mind, and once more his head was functioning clearly.

"Another of the Duke's tricks, I suppose?" he remarked.

"You suppose correctly," was the answer. "You have slipped out of our hands often enough, but this time we have you. You haven't a chance in the world."

The Phantom was silent for a time, realizing that his captors had turned the trick neatly and with dispatch. Evidently they were men of much finer mental caliber than Matt Lunn and Dan the Dope. It had been a clever ruse, and they had set the trap very deftly.

"What's the programme?" he inquired.

"You will see soon enough."

The Phantom asked no more questions. Suddenly he remembered Granger, and he wondered whether the reporter had been able to follow the speeding car. It was doubtful, he thought, unless Granger had been lucky enough to find a taxicab in a hurry. Yet the fellow was resourceful and keen-witted, and it was possible——

His thoughts were rudely interrupted. The car slowed down, and almost in the same instant a hand gripped him around the throat and shoved him back against the cushion. Another hand put a cloth over his mouth, and he became conscious of a cloying, sickeningly sweetish odor. Gradually his sensations drifted into chaos as his head grew heavier and heavier. He heard voices, but they sounded as if coming from a great distance, and he had an odd feeling that the car was sliding down a bottomless abyss. Then a great void seemed to swallow him up, and he knew nothing more.

Finally, after what seemed a lapse of hours, his mind drifted out of the stupor. There was a burning sensation in his throat and he felt sick and weak. He tried to move, but something restrained him, and he had a dull impression that he was roped to a chair and that the chair itself was clamped to the floor. His eyelids fluttered weakly, and he closed them instinctively as a door opened behind him.

Two men were entering the room, and one of them was chuckling gleefully, as if he had just heard a good joke. Though his thoughts were wandering in a haze, it occurred to him that it might be well to feign unconsciousness. He closed his eyes tightly and sat motionless in the chair. The two men advanced until they stood in front of him. The Phantom felt their eyes on his face.

"Capital!" exclaimed one of them, and he thought there was something familiar about the voice. "Too bad the Duke can't be here and see this! It would do his soul good to see his old enemy strapped to a chair. Well, Somers, I guess this will be the end of the Gray Phantom."

The words stung the listener's senses like a whiplash. He tried to identify the voice, but he was unable to recall where he had heard it before.

"We've got him just where we want him," remarked the man addressed as Somers, "and I don't think he'll get away from us this time. It will be a miracle if he does."

"Not even a miracle can save him. The Phantom is done for. You did a good job, Somers."

"Oh, it was easy enough. All we had to do was to shoot some dope into the moll, pose her in the window of the car, and drive past the place where we had been tipped off we would find the Phantom. I was just wondering how to get him out of the joint, when he walks out of a doorway, catches a glimpse of the skirt, and rushes blindly into the trap. It worked like greased lightning. Looks as though he'd be dead to the world for quite a while yet."

The Phantom repressed a smile. His superb constitution was already shaking off the effects of the chloroform.

"How is the little doll?" inquired the first speaker, who seemed to be a man of authority in the Duke's organization.

"Chipper as a wild cat. She came to shortly after we got here. That kid had spunk, and she's all there on looks. I don't blame the Gray Phantom for falling for her. I would myself."

"Sentiment and business make a bad mixture," was the other's dry comment. "Don't let a pretty face

bedevil you, Somers. The young lady is here to serve our purpose. After that——"

He stopped, and the ensuing pause somehow impressed the Phantom as ominous.

"Well, then what?" asked Somers, and there was a slight catch to his voice.

"She is a shrewd young thing and she knows too much for our good. Our safety demands that—but we'll cross that bridge when we get to it." He laughed again, as if to rid his mind of unpleasant thoughts. "I can scarcely realize that the Gray Phantom is in our power at last. It's almost too good to be true."

"It is true, though. Say, won't he get a jolt when he comes out of the daze and finds himself strapped to a chair?"

"That isn't the only jolt that's in store for him. We'll give him a glimpse of the big show, just for the moral effect it will have on him. Just a little eye teaser, you know, Somers. Is everything ready?"

"Ready to a dot. Want to have a look?"

The other answered affirmatively, and the two men left the room. The last part of the conversation had been unintelligible to the Phantom, and he did not try to puzzle it out. The unfinished sentence and its train of vaguely disturbing thoughts haunted him. Helen Hardwick was to serve some mysterious purpose. After that—he wondered why he felt a chill as he tried to imagine the rest. The words left unspoken suggested terrifying possibilities.

He opened his eyes. Evidently the two men had extinguished the lights upon leaving, for the room was dark. With the fragmentary sentence still echoing in his ears, he tore at the ropes, but the attempt only bruised his wrists.

Suddenly he sat still, his eyes fixed on a tiny light

that had appeared in the back of the room. The point of luminance grew larger and larger, swelling into a circle of pale radiance, and in its center he saw something that caused him to wonder whether he was dreaming a madman's dream.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE PHANTOM HEARS A SCREAM

RIGID in every fiber, the Phantom stared at the circle of light, which seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. At first small as the head of a pin, it gradually unfolded and expanded, at the same time changing from white into a pale greenish hue that dissolved the surrounding darkness into translucent mist.

As it grew larger, the light wrapped itself around an object of strange appearance. It was gray as ashes and its shape gave forth a weird suggestion that it had once been a living thing. The pale, ghostly light that surrounded it like a nimbus gave it a monstrous character.

"A skull!" mumbled the Phantom. Under ordinary circumstances he could have looked upon it calmly, but the stillness and darkness, broken only by the pallid glow in the distance, gave the object a mystical touch that cast a spell over his senses.

His nerves had withstood physical fear in its most severe forms, but they quavered a little before this subtle and bewildering manifestation. His weakness nettled him and he closed his eyes and sought to banish the thing from his mind, but the vision as it lingered in his imagination was even more disturbing than the reality. Again he opened his eyes and looked fixedly to one side, determined not to let an inanimate thing of bone upset his nerves. A slight

shiver ran through him as, among the shadows at the wall, he discerned a dim shape. He could barely distinguish its outlines, but again he received an impression of something that had once pulsed with life and was now hollow and dead. He peered sharply at the blurred shape standing grimly erect a few feet from his chair, and presently he saw what it was.

Then he laughed, but the laugh sounded a trifle forced. He had seen a similar object before, in one of the glass cages in Doctor Bimble's laboratory, but he had regarded it with no stronger feeling than mild curiosity. Now, in the stillness and gloom, the sight made him feel as if a dead hand had touched him. He turned his head toward the opposite wall, and there, etched dimly in the shadows, was another figure. A few feet away he glimpsed a third, and in the distance were a fourth and a fifth.

In the air there was a creeping chill, like a breath from a tomb. He felt no fear, but he experienced the acute depression that seizes even the strongest when standing in the presence of death, and his physical and mental distress was aggravated by his inability to move even an arm. The stifling air made him feel as though he were in a black and silent mausoleum, with dead things on all sides.

An unaccountable fascination caused him to look once more at the luminous circle. The greenish light seemed to have grown a trifle dimmer, but the waning of the glow only lent an added touch of hideousness to the object in the center of the nimbus. It fired his imagination, and he fancied that something loathsome was staring out at him through the black hollows where the eyes had been.

As the circular light faded, he thought it was drawing closer to where he sat. As if gently propelled by an invisible hand, the paling circle of light

was creeping slowly nearer, moving steadily toward his chair.

He pulled at the ropes. Now the fringe of light was so faint that the skull was only a shapeless blur, but its dimness rendered its creeping approach all the more uncanny. In a little while, if it continued in its present course, it would touch his face. He wondered why his senses shrank from the encounter, for he knew that the contact could not harm him.

Finally the light died, leaving an intense, oppressive darkness. Though he could neither hear nor see, he was aware that the object was still creeping toward him and that in a few moments he would feel its chilling touch. There was something subtly enervating about its silent and stealthy advance, something that inspired him with a feeling he had never experienced when standing face to face with a foe of flesh and blood.

Then, without apparent cause, he sensed a change in the atmosphere. The oppression suddenly left him, and he knew instinctively that something had halted the advance of the dreaded thing. He drew a long, deep breath as he tried to account for the relief that had come so suddenly to him.

His thoughts were interrupted by the opening of a door at his back and the entrance of two men. He could not see them, but their footfalls told him that they were groping toward the point where he sat. Silently they fell to work and released him from the chair, but his arms and legs were still tied and he was as helpless as before. He wondered, as he was being carried from the room, what fresh ordeal awaited him.

The two men carried him across the hall and into another room, where he was placed in a chair. He was surprised to see the sunlight streaming in

through the window, for the darkness from which he had just emerged had left an impression of impenetrable night on his mind.

"The big chief will be in directly," announced one of the men as they were leaving.

The Phantom felt a thrill of expectancy at the thought that at last he was to come face to face with the Duke's chief agent. Then he began to look about him. From where he sat, all that was to be seen through the window was the murky wall of a factory building. The room was small, and the only furniture was a table and three chairs. In vain he looked for something that might suggest a way of escape.

He turned quickly as a step sounded outside the door. It came open, and for several moments he stared at the man who entered. Then he laughed, a short, unnatural laugh that sounded hollow even to himself. The man who stood before him was Doctor Tyson Bimble.

He would never have guessed that the anthropologist was the man through whom the Duke directed his criminal enterprises from his cell in prison, but on second thought the discovery was not so surprising. Since their first meeting he had suspected that anthropology was not Bimble's sole interest in life. He had felt that it was merely a cloak for other activities, though it had not occurred to him what these might be.

"You are pale," observed Bimble, looking at him through his thick lenses; "but I sha'n't trouble to feel your pulse this morning. I have no doubt it's normal."

The doctor, with his stiltlike legs and top-heavy head, seemed as ludicrous as ever, and his face wore the same beatific smile that had greeted the Phantom

when they first met, but his eyes were a trifle stern, and there was an unfamiliar briskness about his movements.

The Phantom swallowed his emotions and braced his mind for a duel of wits with the doctor. Many a time in the past he had outmaneuvered men as crafty as his present adversary. For the present he tried not to think of Helen, for he would need a clear mind and steady nerves if he was to help her.

"Have you made any new scientific discoveries since I saw you last, doctor?" he inquired chattily.

Bimble's eyes twinkled. "No; but I dare say you have."

"I have discovered a new use for skeletons."

"New? You are mistaken, my excellent friend. The efficacy of skeletons and like objects as means of moral suasion has been understood for a long time. I believe the wicked old doges of Venice used similar methods when they wished to put their enemies into a receptive frame of mind and did not care to resort to physical torture. It is strange how all of us—even a strong man like yourself—stand in awe of objects associated with death and decay."

"It is," agreed the Phantom dryly. "But I don't quite get the idea. I admit the ghostly vaudeville you staged for my benefit was a bit creepy. I would rather face a regiment of smooth rascals like you than a grinning skeleton. But if you expected me to come out of that spook chamber a broken man you are doomed to disappointment."

"I didn't, as a matter of fact." The doctor smiled amusedly. "I am well aware that it takes something more than that to break a man like the Gray Phantom."

"Then what was the object?"

"You shall see presently. My friend, you have

given me no end of trouble. Since the day you made your first unexpected appearance in my laboratory, I have done my best to save you from the police, but you seemed determined to rush blindly into their arms. I did not realize how stubborn and foolhardy you were till the morning when I entered your bedroom and found it empty. You knew the police were combing the town for you, and I had hoped that would keep you in."

"It was a shameless abuse of hospitality," confessed the Phantom. "But I take it you were not altogether unselfish in your desire to save me from arrest."

Bimble smiled as he ran his eyes up and down the Phantom's figure. "Borrowed feathers are not becoming to you," he observed critically. "These togs are atrocious. But the idea itself was excellent. I did not even guess that the Gray Phantom was masquerading as a newspaper reporter until the trick you played on Pinto and Dan the Dope gave me an inkling of the truth. Then, last evening, upon my return from a visit in the neighborhood, I found you and Liuetenant Culligore in the basement of my house. The few words I overheard were sufficient to verify my suspicions. I saw that Culligore had you cornered, and I guessed you would try to reach the tunnel. Then— But I think you know the rest."

"All except what happened to Culligore."

The doctor beamed. "Poor Culligore! He's really a much cleverer man than you would think—cleverer than yourself, in certain ways. An automatic equipped with a flash light and a silencer put a bullet into his leg while he was looking for you in the cellar. A most regrettable accident!" Bimble laughed softly. "The poor man is now under my

professional care, and I fear he will not be out for some time."

"I can guess the nature of the professional attentions you are giving him. But why were you so anxious that I should not fall into the hands of the police?"

"Because I had certain plans in which you were concerned, and your premature arrest would have seriously interfered with them. Can't you guess what they were?"

"The Duke has a goose to pick with me, I believe. At any rate, I understand he is not very benevolently disposed toward me."

"You have been correctly advised. The Duke is a very thoroughgoing hater, as you will discover before we are through with you. Not only that, but he is an adept in the gentle art of mixing business and pleasure. He also knows how to bring down a flock of birds with a single stone. Take, for instance, the case of old Sylvanus Gage."

"Yes," murmured the Phantom, fixing the doctor with a keen gaze, "the Duke showed his genius there. He planned the murder very shrewdly so that the guilt would be fastened on me. It was an admirable way of getting revenge."

The doctor smiled. "True, but it wasn't so simple as all that. You are not giving the Duke half the credit he deserves. I told you that he always mixes business and pleasure. These walls are deaf, so there is no reason why I should not enlighten you. Gage had been for years a member of the Duke's organization. It was through him the band disposed of the proceeds from its activities. It was a risky business and he lived in constant danger. Hence the tunnel, which gave him a convenient avenue of escape in emergencies. The housekeeper, an estimable soul,

knew that her employer was conducting some sort of illegitimate business, and she assisted him in it to a certain extent, which explains any symptoms of bad conscience she may have shown. I don't think, however, that she was aware of Gage's membership in the Duke's organization. Gage was a valuable man, but his insatiate greed led him astray. He double-crossed the band in financial transactions, and when called to task for his crooked work he threatened to cause trouble. To put it briefly, it was decided that he must be put out of the way."

"I see." The Phantom smiled, but his eyes were hard. "The Duke avenged himself on two persons with one stroke. He not only removed Gage, but arranged matters so that suspicion for the crime would fall on me."

"Exactly. You are now beginning to appreciate the Duke's many-sided talents. Of course, his main object was to repay you for the merciless joke you played on him when you put him and most of his gang behind bars. Where to find you was a poser. It was known that you had taken your treasures and gone into hiding somewhere, but no one seemed to have the faintest inkling of your whereabouts. Knowing your sensitiveness about such matters, the Duke guessed that the murder of Gage, with the circumstances pointing to you as its perpetrator, would smoke you out."

"It was a good guess. I had to come out and clear myself, and that gave the Duke his chance. Now that you have me where you want me, what do you propose to do with me? Am I to be handed over to the police, or have you engaged passage for me on the Stygian ferry?"

The question seemed to amuse the doctor. "If we meant to hand you over to the police we would

scarcely have gone to such great lengths to save you from arrest. What is to be done with you eventually hasn't been decided as yet. The Duke's orders are to dispose of you in whichever way will hurt you the most and give him the ultimate degree of revenge. There is a question involved in that. You are not the kind of man that fears death."

"Thanks."

Bimble's deceptively mild eyes regarded him carefully. "I think there are certain other things that would hurt you far more. For instance— But we will drop that phase of the subject for the present and get down to the more practical side. As I told you, the Duke always mixes business and pleasure, which in this case means a judicious blend of revenge and profit."

The Phantom's brows went up. A tinge of greed and craftiness had dimmed the habitual look of serenity in the doctor's eyes. He was looking down at his scrupulously polished shoes while playing with his watch chain.

"How?" asked the Phantom. The uncertainty as to his own fate did not trouble him in the least, but all his will power was needed to maintain a semblance of coolness whenever he thought of Helen.

"You put in many very busy years at the pleasant occupation of annexing other people's property," murmured the doctor. "The magnitude of your enterprises has been the talk of the whole continent. There must be a good many millions stored away in that retreat of yours."

The Phantom smiled. Imaginative newspaper writers had pictured the Gray Phantom living like an East Indian potentate in some snug retreat, surrounded by countless treasures and a splendor that would have offered a gorgeous Arabian Nights' set-

ting. The fable, eagerly swallowed by the public, seemed wildly grotesque in comparison with the truth.

"You're forgetting something, doctor. I never had the Duke's keen eye for business. I was not a crook for the sake of the loot, but for the excitement I found in the game, and I usually gave the stuff away after I had had the fun of taking it. I haven't much that would interest the Duke."

The doctor's lips curled in a way that indicated strong skepticism. "You will let me be the judge as to that, my friend. All I ask of you is that you tell me explicitly and veraciously where this collection of yours may be found."

The Phantom drew himself up as far as the ropes permitted. The smile was still on his lips, but in the depths of his eyes lurked a hard glitter. "What if I refuse?"

"Why, man, you can't refuse! You are in no position to do anything but surrender to my wishes."

"Wrong, doctor." He gave a low, metallic laugh. "You ought to know that the Gray Phantom never surrenders. Threats and bullying can't move me an inch. That's absolutely final."

The doctor seemed not at all disconcerted. "I expected you to say that. You are stubborn as a mule, but fortunately I have means of persuasion at my disposal. If I can't bend you, I will break you."

He rose abruptly and left the room. There had been something in his tones that lingered in the Phantom's ears after he had gone. He was back in a few moments, and once more his face was wreathed in smiles. Without a word he sat down, crossed his thin legs, and lighted a cigarette, then smoked in silence while the Phantom scanned his face

for a clew to the mysterious errand that had taken him out of the room.

Minutes passed, and still the doctor smiled and smoked. From time to time he raised his tranquil eyes and glanced at the door as if expecting somebody, and all the while there was an air of pleasurable anticipation about him.

Suddenly the Phantom stiffened. For a moment he sat rigid, listening, then jerked forward in the chair, straining fiercely at the ropes.

Somewhere in the building a woman had screamed. The shriek, sharp and explosive, as if inspired by a terror long restrained, dinned with hideous significance against the Phantom's ears. His heart stood still for a moment.

The voice that had uttered that mad, unforgettable cry was Helen Hardwick's.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE PHANTOM'S RUSE

THE doctor placidly finished his cigarette. The sleek, genial smile had not left his face for an instant, and his eye still held the same twinkle of languid amusement.

"Miss Hardwick is a very plucky young woman," he murmured, "but evidently the spook chamber, as you so aptly termed it a little while ago, has proved too much for her nerves. The cry we just heard seemed to indicate that she was in great distress. Being alone in a dark room with nothing but skeletons for company is not a very pleasant experience for a woman."

The Phantom's face turned a shade whiter. For a moment he was dazed by the realization that Helen was undergoing the same excruciating ordeal to which he himself had been subjected. The ghostly spectacle had caused even his strong nerves to writhe; and he shuddered at thought of the effect it must have on her more delicate organism.

"I gave you a little taste of it just to enable you to appreciate Miss Hardwick's predicament," continued the doctor in matter-of-fact tones. "The arrangement is simplicity itself. My excellent Jerome fixed it up. The scenic effects are so simple that a child could have handled them. Yet you will admit, I think, that they serve their purpose. I once

knew a person—not a weakling, either—who went mad under similar pressure. It is strange how——"

Another shriek, not so loud as the first, but long-drawn and hoarse, interrupted him. He paused for a moment, eyeing the Phantom with a level glance while the scream lasted, then fell to polishing his lenses.

"As I was about to remark," he went on, "it is strange how darkness and a touch of the grewsome affect one's mind. The soul seems to shrink from such things. The reason, I think, must be atavistic. The poor wretch I was telling you about, the one who lost his mind——"

"Stop it!" cried the Phantom. His voice was husky. "Get her out of that room before she goes mad!"

Doctor Bimble seemed suddenly interested. "Do I understand that you are willing to listen to reason? Are you ready to reconsider the suggestion I made a while ago and which you so grandiloquently rejected? In other words, are you willing to tell me where your treasures are hidden?"

"Yes—anything! I'll do whatever you ask. Only stop that infernal hocus-pocus at once!"

"Oh, very well." There was a smile of keen gratification on Bimble's lips as he got up and left the room.

The Phantom, every limb shaking, stared at the door through which he had passed. Suddenly his blood-streaked eyes grew wide. He remembered something that was almost as terrifying as the shrieks he had just heard. His thoughts went back to the moment when he had awakened in the dark room, and he recalled the snatches of conversation he had overheard.

One of the two speakers, he was now almost cer-

tain, had been Doctor Bimble. The voice had sounded familiar, and he would probably have recognized it but for the dazed condition he was in. One of the doctor's sentences had burned itself into the Phantom's brain:

"The young lady is here to serve our purpose. After that——"

He saw it all in a blinding flash that scorched like fire. With their usual cunning the Duke's men had perceived that neither by torture nor by threats of death could the Gray Phantom be forced to comply with their desires. They had known that he held his life lightly and could suffer personal punishment like an Indian. And so their diabolically crafty minds had conceived the idea of letting Helen Hardwick's agonized cries pierce his armor of pride and obduracy, thus accomplishing what could never have been accomplished by other means.

They had judged him accurately, was his grim reflection. Rather than see a hair of Helen's head harmed he would gladly make any sacrifice. But the sinister significance of the doctor's words had been plain. The Phantom would not insure Helen's safety by accepting Bimble's terms. Evidently, Miss Hardwick had come into possession of information which the gang feared she might divulge if set free, and consequently she was to be silenced forever as soon as Bimble's purpose had been attained.

While he awaited the doctor's return the Phantom thought quickly. By accepting Bimble's terms he would only be hastening Helen's doom, for the gang, having no further use for her after they had gained their ends, would probably put her to death quickly. On the other hand, by rejecting the conditions, he would at least gain time. In the meanwhile Bimble might inflict cruel suffering upon her, but his selfish

interests would restrain him from taking her life, for, once he had done so, his sole hold upon the Phantom would be gone.

The reasoning was plain, but he found it hard to reach a decision. Perhaps death would be merciful in comparison with the tortures that Bimble might subject her to. He was caught between the jaws of a fearful dilemma, and the only sane course he could see was to play for time.

Doctor Bimble returned. "Why do women never swoon until the worst is over?" he questioned in whimsical tones. "Miss Hardwick is a surprising young lady, but she is not free from the foibles of her sex. She had no sooner been taken out of the dark room than she promptly collapsed."

The Phantom held back the biting words on his tongue, but he could not forego a look of withering contempt.

"Do you know," the doctor went on, "I am almost certain that Miss Hardwick knows where your retreat is located? In fact, she let slip something that convinces me she does. But do you suppose the stubborn little beauty would tell? Not she! I don't believe the fear of eternal fires could force her to speak."

He had guessed correctly, but the Phantom carefully refrained from signifying by a look or a word that it was so. Miss Hardwick knew about Sea-Glimpse, and it was with mingled feelings the Phantom heard of her refusal to reveal the secret. Had she become aware, through some process of divination, that her life would be forfeited the moment the information was in the doctor's possession, or had she been guided by other reasons?

"So you see," continued Bimble in smooth tones, "that you will save the little lady from all sorts of

unpleasantness by acceding to my very reasonable terms. It would be a shame if such a charming woman should become a gibbering maniac as a result of obstinacy on your part. Where did you say this place of yours is situated?"

"I haven't said yet." The Phantom forced a laugh. "Before I do, you and I must have a definite understanding. Do you agree to set Miss Hardwick free the moment I have given you the information?"

"What an unreasonable question, my dear Phantom! I agree to do nothing of the kind. I shall keep Miss Hardwick here until I have satisfied myself that you have been dealing with me on the square and that the directions you have given me are accurate."

"Fair enough. But after you have satisfied yourself in regard to my good faith, what then?"

"Then," said the doctor, and there was not a trace of guile in his face, "Miss Hardwick shall be immediately released."

"On your word of honor?"

"On my word of honor."

"Snake!" the Phantom was tempted to say, but he pretended to be satisfied. Already his mind was inventing a ruse. He would gain several hours of valuable time by inveigling the doctor into a search for a place that had existence only in the Phantom's imagination. In the meantime several things were likely to happen. It was just possible that Granger had been able to trace the movements of the limousine and would come to the rescue. At any rate, the Phantom believed that if he could but stave off the crisis for a while his customary luck would once more reassert itself.

His mind worked fast. Doubtless the doctor knew that he had arrived in New York less than

twenty-four hours after the Gage murder. Allowing for slow and infrequent trains and the time required for news to reach out-of-the-way places, he would have to choose a point that was not more than ten or twelve hours removed from New York. With a mental picture of the map before his eyes, he outlined a highly imaginative route to the doctor.

Bimble made a few notes. Then he looked up, and for once there was an ominous glint in the usually placid eyes.

"My men will start at once," he announced. "They will be instructed to wire me as soon as they have reached their destination. I hope, for Miss Hardwick's sake, that you have not tried to deceive me."

With that he was gone; but the softly spoken words, edged with just the faintest trace of a sinister note, lingered for a long time in the Phantom's memory.

CHAPTER XXVIII

PINTO'S CONFESSION

THE Phantom awoke with a start, vaguely conscious that he had been sleeping for several hours. Shortly after his interview with Doctor Bimble, he had been removed to a small dark room with a single shuttered window, through which no sunlight or air entered. The ropes around his wrists and ankles had been removed, but his movements were restricted by a chain only a few feet long, one end of which was padlocked to his right leg while the other was clamped to the wall.

Jerome, more tight-lipped than ever, had brought him a meal, and he had eaten with relish, after which he had lain down on the cot and gone to sleep. A lessening of his mental tension had come with the conviction that Helen was in no immediate danger and would be safe until the doctor heard from his messengers, which he probably would not do until after midnight.

He had slept soundly, and now he was refreshed in body and mind. He inspected his surroundings with a keen eye. The little room was admirably adapted to the purposes of a cell. Even if he were inclined to shout for help, the shutters doubtless would render such an effort useless. The room was sparsely lighted by an electric bulb in the ceiling, and he noted that the door, walls, and floor had a sub-

stantial appearance. The only objects within his reach were the cot and a table.

His face fell as he took an inventory of his pockets, noticing that all that remained of his belongings was a watch and a handkerchief. His wallet, with Dan the Dope's pistol, was gone, and so was the little metal box that on so many occasions had enabled him to squeeze out of tight corners. The chain was not heavy, but strong enough to resist all the force he could muster, and each end was fastened in a way that left him no hope of escape.

"The worthy doctor is taking no chances," he muttered. "He has left me as helpless as a newborn babe. Wonder where I am."

He had no idea where the black limousine had taken him, for it had traveled a devious course, and he had been chloroformed before it reached its destination. He was certain he was not in Doctor Bimble's house, for he had searched that dwelling from cellar to attic and there had been no room in it that resembled this one. Probably he was in some other house controlled by Doctor Bimble or one of his associates.

After all, where he was did not matter, greatly. The one thing that concerned him was his helplessness, for evidently the doctor had taken every conceivable precaution against his prisoner's escape. Everything considered, it was as hopeless a situation as the Phantom had ever faced.

A glance at his watch told him it was nearly four o'clock. He had eight hours in which to accomplish the seemingly impossible before the doctor should learn from his agents that they had been sent out on a wild-goose chase. He shuddered as he contemplated what would be the consequences if he failed. Yet, he told himself, the course he had taken was

the only one possible under the circumstances. If he had directed the doctor's agents to Sea-Glimpse, Helen's usefulness to the organization would have been ended, and then——

He turned quickly as the door opened, admitting Doctor Bimble, with a newspaper in his hand.

"Thought you would be interested in the news about Pinto," began the doctor, advancing somewhat cautiously and taking care not to step within the narrow half circle that bounded his prisoner's movements. The Phantom regarded him languidly, for his mind was on other things.

"Has Pinto recovered consciousness?" he asked indifferently.

Bimble nodded. "Much sooner than the doctors expected, and he has celebrated his return to consciousness by making a rather interesting statement."

"Not a confession?" The Phantom was still speaking in dull tones. In the last few days he had almost lost sight of the purpose that had called him to New York. The danger threatening Helen Hardwick had seemed far more important than the mystery of the two murders.

"Well, you might call it that, though it probably isn't the kind of confession you have in mind. Pinto has made a clean breast of everything, but he still insists that you murdered Gage."

"That's a contradiction," mumbled the Phantom. "He is not making a clean breast of things so long as he denies his guilt."

"His statement sounds fairly convincing, nevertheless. He admits practically everything except that he committed the murder. For instance, he frankly admits that he concealed the body of the housekeeper and——"

"That in itself is evidence of his guilt."

"But Pinto has what looks like a satisfactory explanation. He seems to be an honest, hard-working, unimaginative fellow, not overintelligent, and deeply devoted to his wife and baby. You probably know the type. He says that for months before Gage was murdered he had a queer premonition that something of that kind was to happen, and he never passed the house without an uneasy feeling. I suppose what he really means is that he had noticed signs of strange doings about the place, and that without analyzing his impressions he found it getting on his nerves.

"Pinto reiterates his previous assertion that Gage made a dying statement accusing you of the crime. He admits, however, that he felt nervous about the whole affair. The poor fellow was in a very trying position. After forcing the door, which was bolted on the inside, and listening to Gage's dying words, he made a careful examination of the room, paying particular attention to the little window which was so narrow that no grown person could possibly have crawled through it. He did not understand how even an accomplished person like the Phantom could have committed the murder and escaped from the room.

"Then, all of a sudden, Pinto got panicky. Even his crude intellect perceived that it looked as though nobody but himself could have committed the murder. He thought of his wife and his baby, and he did not relish the idea of being tried for murder. As he saw it, he might easily be convicted and sent to the chair. However, his fears proved unfounded, for nobody accused him of the crime, and Pinto could breathe freely once more."

"But what about the housekeeper?" inquired the Phantom, gradually becoming more interested.

"I am coming to that. After the murder of Gage,

Pinto got into the habit of visiting the house between rounds. He was still hoping to discover a way whereby the Phantom could have escaped from the room. Late one night, according to his statement, he found the housekeeper's body in the same room where Gage had been murdered. He says the body was still warm, so the woman could not have been dead long. At the discovery all his fears returned with trebled force. The supposition, he thought, would be that the murderer of Gage had also killed Mrs. Trippe. The Gray Phantom was supposed to be in jail at the time and therefore could not be accused of having murdered the housekeeper.

"Pinto was in a terrible quandary. Since, as he thought at the time, the Phantom could not have murdered Mrs. Trippe, it might be questioned whether he had murdered Gage. The whole case might be reopened, in which event he feared the finger of suspicion must inevitably point to him. Again Pinto thought of his wife and baby, and, the more he thought of them, the more nervous he became. He did a foolish thing, as men often do when fear conquers reason. He could think of nothing to do but cover up the crime until he could get a chance to think the thing over, and so he carried the body upstairs and concealed it behind some packing cases. Later, after it developed that the Phantom had not been in jail and had no alibi, he saw no reason for concealing the body longer. He explains at length what happened when he went to the storeroom to drag it out and was interrupted by you."

Bimble smiled blandly, but he was studying the Phantom's face out of the corner of an eye. "What do you think of Pinto's confession?"

The Phantom considered while he glanced at the

papers Bimble handed him. The statement was there, just as summarized by the doctor. Granting a crude intellect and a mind not too analytical, he thought it quite possible that an innocent man might act exactly as described in Pinto's statement. Further, the story had all the earmarks of truth, for a guilty mind would have tried to invent a less grotesque tale. Of a sudden the Phantom found that all his calculations and theories in regard to the murder had been upset by Pinto's surprising and unexpected explanation.

"Why ask me?" was his reply. "You know the murderer."

"Perhaps. I was just curious to hear what you would think."

There was a wrinkle of perplexity on the Phantom's brow. Assuming that Pinto was innocent, the difficulties in the way of solving the mystery and exculpating himself had been vastly complicated.

"If Pinto didn't do it," persisted the doctor suavely, "who do you suppose did?"

The Phantom could not tell why, but the question gave him a mental jolt. In the past few hours his concern for Helen had claimed all his thoughts, and before that he had been so firmly convinced of Pinto's guilt that there had been no room in his mind for other suspicions. The possibility that someone other than the policeman might be involved had not occurred to him.

He looked up and found the doctor's soft eyes searching his face with an odd intensity. Bimble seemed intent on ascertaining what deductions his prisoner would make from Pinto's statement, and apparently this had been the only reason for his call.

"My question seems to have stumped you," he observed.

The Phantom shrugged his shoulders. "With Pinto eliminated, I'm entirely at sea. In view of the bolted door and the size of the window, I don't see how anyone else could have murdered Gage, unless—" He checked himself abruptly, and of a sudden he saw a great light. In the next instant a smile masked his agitation. "Unless," he finished with a chuckle, "I did it myself."

Bimble seemed satisfied. "Excellent logic, my friend," he murmured as he stepped to the door. With his hand on the knob he turned and fixed his gaze on the Phantom's face. "I shall pay you another visit as soon as I hear from my men."

His tone carried a sinister emphasis, but the Phantom scarcely noticed it.

"With Pinto eliminated," he said half aloud when the door had closed, "only one other person could have committed the murders. And I know that person!"

CHAPTER XXIX

THE PHANTOM'S VISITOR

WITH quick and nervous steps the Phantom walked back and forth within the narrow semicircle allowed him by the chain. The solution of the mystery had come to him in a flash of intuition, but his elation had been brief. It was now half past eleven, and after cudgeling his wits for hours, he found the problem of how to extricate himself and Helen from their predicament as insolvable as ever.

Soon Bimble would receive word from his messengers that they had been hoaxed, and then Helen would be subjected to another agonizing ordeal in the dark room. The Phantom shuddered as his imagination pictured her strapped to the chair in that chamber of ghastly things. Again he looked sharply about the room, hoping against hope that something would suggest a way of escape to him.

He found nothing. The only objects were the cot and the table, and they offered no solution whatever. His pockets contained nothing but a handkerchief and a watch, together with the cigarettes and matches Jerome had brought him with his dinner. At least a score of times during the late afternoon and evening he had given the chain a minute inspection, only to be convinced that it could not be tampered with. With the aid of a small nail or a pen-

knife he might have been able to pick the lock that held it to his ankle, but not even a pin had been left him.

The Phantom was all but ready to admit defeat. His only fortifying thought was that he had never yet been the loser in a game of wits, and that for Helen's sake he could not fail now.

He rose quickly from the cot as the door opened and Doctor Bimble strode into the room. His face was dark, and a look of sullen anger had taken the place of his usual smile.

"You lied!" he declared gruffly. "I half suspected you would, but I hardly thought you would attempt anything so clumsy as this. What have you gained by it?"

"Time," said the Phantom, pretending a coolness he did not feel.

The doctor laughed derisively. There was a dull flush in his cheeks and an ugly glitter in his eyes, but again he took care not to step within the Phantom's reach.

"Time! Bah! Really, Vanardy, you're simpler than I thought. Just as if a few hours more or less could make any difference! You will either tell me what I want to know, or, Miss Hardwick will go to the madhouse or the grave. She will be as harmless in one place as in the other. I trust you understand?"

"Your meaning is perfectly clear." The Phantom spoke in level tones. "If you would come a step closer, I should take extreme pleasure in beating you within an inch of your life. But you have no inclination in that direction, I see. Like most of your kind, you are a coward."

"Words never hurt."

"Furthermore," continued the Phantom, "you will

be in jail before Miss Hardwick goes to either of the places you have just mentioned."

"Jail?" The doctor stared as if he thought the statement utterly preposterous. "Jail! Ha, ha! Good joke coming from a man who can't move six feet."

"Enjoy it while you can. As you may remember, I perpetrated the same kind of joke on the Duke, and he doesn't seem to relish that brand of humor."

The doctor winced as if an unpleasant thought had been suggested to him, then walked stiffly to the door. "Remember," was his parting shot, "if you persist in your obstinacy, it will be either the madhouse or the grave for Miss Hardwick."

He slammed the door as he went out, and the Phantom's face sobered the moment he was alone. His threat had not been altogether an idle one, for it had driven a wholesome misgiving into the doctor's heart; yet the Phantom was painfully aware that he was in a desperate situation. Throwing himself on the cot, he turned the problem over and over in his mind. Black as the outlook seemed, he could scarcely believe that all was lost. He still had faith in his star, and it was this that had braced him and enabled him to speak with such confidence in Doctor Bimble's presence.

After a while something drew his gaze to the window. He listened intently. A faint scraping sound reached his ears, and it occurred to him that it had been going on for several minutes, though he had been too preoccupied to notice it until now. He got up and stepped as close to the window as the chain permitted. Now he heard it again—a slow, dull grinding and scraping that remotely suggested that someone was attacking a metallic object with a blunt tool.

He waited breathlessly. Evidently someone was trying to enter the room, and he wondered whether the intruder was coming as friend or foe. Perhaps the amazing luck that had so often turned a critical situation in his favor was once more coming back to him.

A click sounded, then the boards in front of the window came apart, and the Phantom gasped as Thomas Granger jumped into the room.

"You!" he exclaimed.

"Not so loud!" whispered the reporter. He was still wearing the Phantom's clothing, and the garments were wrinkled and streaked with dirt. "The house is full of members of the Duke's gang. Holy smoke, you're certainly in a fix!"

He stared at the cabin, then looked quickly about the room. "Don't ask me how I found you. I had a devil of a time, and it's a longer story than I've got time to tell. Lookouts are stationed in front and in rear, and it was only by sheer luck and some quick fist work that I got through. How am I to get you out of here?"

The Phantom regarded him thoughtfully. "Didn't you know that Doctor Bimble was the Duke's chief representative?" he asked.

"Never had the faintest idea."

"This room is in the rear of the house, I believe."

"Yes, but——"

"You were lucky to locate my window as easily as you did."

"That wasn't luck. I tried several before I found yours. Twice I bumped into the Duke's men. I hate to think what that bunch would do to me if they caught me." He made a wry face. "But this isn't getting you out of here. We'll have to get a move on."

Strangely enough, the Phantom seemed absolutely calm and in no hurry whatever. "I haven't been able to get my bearings," he announced. "Where is this house?"

"Next door to Doctor Bimble's."

The Phantom started. "The one with boarded windows and doors?"

"That's the one. The front is boarded up, and from the street it looks like a vacant house. Nobody would suspect that it was the headquarters of the Duke's gang. I supose Bimble owns or controls both houses, and there is probably a connecting passage somewhere."

The Phantom knitted his brows. He had seen no such passage when he searched the Bimble residence. However, that proved nothing, for it might be so carefully concealed that a hasty search would not reveal it. The arrangement, he thought, was rather ingenious. No one who had seen the anthropologist's home, where everything suggested artlessness and love of simple comforts, would have suspected that the occupant was using the adjacent house for the conduct of criminal enterprises.

"Miss Hardwick is somewhere in the building," he remarked. "Her safety is the first consideration."

"Worse still. You and I might be able to fight our way through, but with a woman on our hands it's almost certain death. It wouldn't be so bad if there weren't so many against us. I have only one gat. How about you?"

"A watch, a handkerchief, a package of cigarettes and some matches are my sole possessions just now."

The reporter scowled. "The Duke's men would be sure to pounce on us before we could get her out

of the house, and I don't suppose Miss Hardwick is bullet-proof."

"What would you suggest?"

Granger reflected. "Have you any friends in town?"

"As far as I know, Peng Yuen is the only one. There may be others, but I wouldn't know where to find them."

"Peng Yuen doesn't look much like a scrapper. We can't appeal to the police, for they are after you just as hard as the Duke's men are. I'd give half my life to be able to meet that bunch in a fair and even fight. Too bad you haven't any friends handy. Say"—and Granger looked as though he had suddenly snatched an inspiration out of the air—"what about the place where you live? Haven't you got some friends there?"

The Phantom looked thoughtful. Rumor had it that he had taken a few carefully-selected members of his former organization with him to his place of retirement. His lips twitched a little.

"It would take sometime to get them here," he murmured, "and we must act in a hurry."

"But it's our only chance. We'll wire them to get a fast car and burn up the roads. I'm rather stuck on the idea of organizing an expedition and rushing to the rescue of a fair lady in distress. Write out your telegram, and I'll sneak out and file it."

The Phantom, chuckling as though he had caught the contagion of the other's enthusiasm, made as if searching his pockets for pencil and paper. "All right. I guess, after all, it is the only thing we can do. A pitched battle in the heart of New York will be something of a novelty. Have you a pencil and a scrap of paper?"

Granger stepped up to the table and handed out

the desired articles. With the reporter standing at his elbow, the Phantom placed the paper on the table, poised the pencil over it, and stood as if framing a message in his mind. Suddenly, with a motion as quick as that of a metallic spring, his hand darted out and gripped Granger's. Then, with another surprisingly swift movement, he jerked the reporter down on the cot and shoved a knee against his chest.

"Tommie Granger," he said in low, measured tones that throbbed with exultation, "I've been waiting a long time to lay my hands on the murderer of Gage and Mrs. Trippe."

CHAPTER XXX

THE ROOM IN THE BASEMENT

THE reporter's face went white.

With lips gaping, he lay rigidly still, staring into the Phantom's hard face. There was a look of great fear in his eyes, and for several moments he seemed incapable of motion. Then he began to wriggle, twist, and squirm, but his efforts were rendered futile by the knee on his chest and the firm clutch in which his hands were held.

"When did you guess it?" he muttered, forcing a sneering grin to his face.

"Just a little while ago. I've acted the simpleton throughout the whole affair. I was so sure of Pinto's guilt that it never occurred to me to suspect anyone else. The moment Pinto was eliminated, I knew you were the murderer. I saw then what I should have seen at once—that Gage was murdered by a man who looked so much like me that, when Gage saw the face of the scoundrel, he was sure it was the Gray Phantom. That's why he told Pinto that I was the murderer."

Granger drew in his breath and opened his mouth as if to shout for help, but the knee pressing against his chest strangled the cry.

"It was all very cleverly arranged," the Phantom went on, "I suppose you were selected for the job because you happen to resemble me. The very en-

tertaining story you told me at Peng Yuen's was probably a skillful blending of truth and fiction. How you happened to join the Duke's gang and how you carried out its orders under cover of your profession really make no difference. The only thing that matters is that you're going to the chair for those two murders."

The reporter, gathering his wits, gave a contemptuous laugh. "The chair, eh? Not just yet, I guess. Several things are likely to happen to you first."

"That remains to be seen. You are fairly clever, Granger, but your cleverness won't help you now. You hood-winked the police very neatly. They had the murderer once, but they felt so sure I was the man they wanted that they let you go as soon as you had satisfied them you were not the Gray Phantom. It was a fairly good joke. I perpetrated another good joke myself when I went to you and borrowed your identity, never guessing that you were the murderer. You took it all in good part, because you couldn't do anything else, but all the while you were scheming to hand me over to the Duke's crowd."

"It was rich! You were so easily taken in that I had to laugh whenever you turned your back."

"I admit it. The reason you took me in so easily was partly because you were a member of an honorable profession, and partly because of the note handed me by Dan the Dope, which seemed to prove that you were on bad terms with the Duke's crowd. That appeared to confirm your story that you had joined the organization for the sole purpose of obtaining inside information. The details of your relations with the gang are not clear to me yet, but neither are they important. If you don't mind, I'll relieve you of this handy little implement."

With a deft motion he reached into Granger's pocket and extracted the reporter's automatic. Then he removed the knee from the man's chest and covered him with the weapon.

"The cutest trick of them all," he continued with a grim chuckle, "was your crawling in here to-night through the window and pretending to have eluded the Duke's sentinels. Of course, the sole object of your dramatic entrance was to inveigle me into revealing the whereabouts of the place where I live. I suppose the worthy doctor had begun to despair of his ability to worm the information out of me by the original plan. It threatened to take too long and entail too many risks, and so he thought he would try a short cut. You led up to the proposition very adroitly, but I saw through the ruse almost at once."

Granger, having got a precarious grip on his nerves, laughed shakily. "You're a first-class guesser —but guessing won't get you out of this fix. It isn't very likely you'll ever see daylight again. As for the dear girl——"

"Leave her out of it!" commanded the Phantom curtly. He thought it unlikely Miss Hardwick would be molested further until Bimble had learned the result of Granger's mission. In the meantime, he told himself, he must make the most of the slight advantage he had gained. He studied the reporter keenly, and all at once an inspiration came to him. "Miss Hardwick," he went on in casual tones, "has an amazing knack of taking care of herself. It wouldn't surprise me at all if she had already found a way out of the amiable doctor's clutches."

"Hardly!" Granger gave another hoarse, sneering laugh. "She's smart, all right, but the big chief knows it, and he isn't taking any chances. He has locked her up in the basement, in a room barely large

enough to turn around in, with a stout door and no window."

"The basement, eh?" The Phantom seemed not at all interested. "This room we are in is on the second floor, isn't it?"

"Third," said Granger, after puzzling for a moment over the question.

"Good!" The Phantom smiled. "You have told me exactly what I wanted to know, Granger, and since you couldn't know the object of my questions, I believe that for once you have spoken the truth. Kindly elevate your hands."

A thrust with the pistol emphasized the command, and Granger sullenly obeyed. With his free hand the Phantom explored the reporter's pockets until he found a small silver-handled knife.

"My property, I believe," he murmured, examining the tool with a critical eye. "It's one of the things you acquired when we swapped clothes and identities. A very handy article, Granger. I've been wishing all night for something of this kind, but the doctor thoughtfully emptied my pockets. Sit very still, Granger."

He spoke with a brisk, cutting emphasis. Moving to the other end of the cot and keeping one eye on Granger, he opened the knife and with the sharp-pointed blade began to pick at the lock that held the chain to his ankle. The pistol lay close at his side, ready to be picked up at a moment's warning. In a short time the lock had yielded to the deft touch of his fingers, and his ankle was free before Granger quite realized what he was doing. A shout rose in the reporter's throat, but in an instant the Phantom's fingers were at his windpipe.

"Quiet!" he warned. "I don't care to be interrupted just yet. Granger, I don't like the togs I've

been wearing the last few days, and you have worn mine just about long enough. We are going to make a quick change. Strip!"

The reporter glared, but his lips trembled and the shaking of his limbs indicated that he was in need of his favorite stimulant.

"Hurry!" urged the Phantom, making a little flourish with the pistol. "Bimble is likely to walk in on us at any moment to see what is keeping you so long. Will you strip voluntarily, or must I tap you on the head and undress you? I don't like to be rough."

The reporter seemed impressed by the argument. With surly acquiescence he kicked off his shoes and started removing his suit. The Phantom, a thin smile hovering about his lips, followed the other's example, keeping the pistol within easy reach while the exchange was in progress. In a little while he was once more garbed in the familiar gray which was his favorite color.

"This is better!" he commented. With an absent-minded air he picked up the chain. For a moment or two his fingers toyed with the lock; then, stooping quickly, he looped the end of the chain around Granger's leg. The reporter growled out a curse as the lock snapped shut.

"Put your hands behind you!" commanded the Phantom, again making a menacing gesture with the pistol. The reporter, his ashen face twitching, glowered savagely as he obeyed, and in a few moments the strings had been removed from his shoes and twisted tightly about his wrists. Finally the Phantom tore a strip from the table-cloth, fashioned it into a gag and thrust it between the reporter's teeth.

"I'm really very much obliged to you, Granger," he murmured dryly as he put the revolver and the

knife into his pockets. "If you hadn't come to me with that barefaced hoax, I should still be wearing a chain around my ankle. Too bad I can't offer you a drink. You seem to need one."

With elastic step he walked to the door. There he pushed a button, and the room went dark. There was a glow in his cheeks and a tingle in his veins as he stepped out in the hall, closing the door behind him. Looking up and down the silent corridor, he saw a stairway at the farther end, and hastened in that direction. At the head of the stairs he all but collided with Doctor Bimble.

"Well, Granger?"

The Phantom thanked his lucky star that the lights in the hall were dim. Under the circumstances, it was the most natural thing in the world for Bimble to suppose that he was addressing the reporter. He knew that Granger had been wearing the Phantom's clothes, and the latter was supposed to be chained securely to a wall.

"No luck," announced the Phantom, simulating Granger's manner of speech. "I gave him exactly the line of talk you suggested, but he spotted the trick right off. He wouldn't listen to me at all."

Even in the dusk the Phantom saw a spiteful look creep into the doctor's face.

"Doesn't he still think you are on his side?"

"He seems to have his suspicions," answered the Phantom, carefully weighing his words, "but he is keeping them to himself. I tried my darndest to flimflam the information out of him, but it was no use. He's about the smoothest article I ever came across."

The doctor nodded curtly as he swung around and started to descend the stairs, the Phantom following.

"I'll break him yet," muttered Bimble vindictively.

"In a few moments he'll hear a tune that he won't like. Miss Hardwick is going to make another trip to the spook chamber, as our mulish friend so aptly termed it. I guess he will come across with the information when he discovers that we mean business."

They reached the floor below. As they passed a light in the hall, the Phantom saw a look of venomous determination in the doctor's face, and he knew that a terrible ordeal would be in store for Helen if Bimble was permitted to have his way. The anthropologist opened a door, and the Phantom glanced into the room over his shoulder. About a dozen men, the expressions on their faces ranging all the way from low cunning to sullen brutality, sat at a long table playing cards.

"Jepson!" called the doctor, taking a bunch of keys from his pockets.

A tall, raw-boned individual with features suggestive of a gorilla's rose from the table and approaching them, with dragging gait.

"I want you and Granger to bring Miss Hardwick here immediately," directed Bimble handing Jepson one of the keys.

The tall man nodded and slunk away. The Phantom, keeping in the shadows as much as possible, followed him down two flights of stairs. Here and there, at a turn in the halls or stairs, they encountered soft-footed, wary-eyed men who passed them in silence.

"The whole crowd seems to be about to-night," observed the Phantom.

"Sure," said Jepson. "The big chief don't like to take chances. He means to rush a bunch of us to the Phantom's place as soon as he finds out where it is. There may be a scrap when we get there."

"Quite likely." The Phantom repressed a smile.

There was a fever in his veins, and he wished Jepson would walk faster. They descended into the basement, sparsely lighted by a small bulb suspended over the stairs, and Jepson picked his way carefully over the floor. Finally he stopped before a door, inserted a key in the lock, and walked in.

The room was dark, but a quick gasp, resembling a sudden intake of breath, told the Phantom it was occupied. His body tingled with suppressed excitement. Jepson was standing in the doorway, and a light scraping sound indicated that he was running his hands over the wall in search of a switch.

As light flooded the narrow room the Phantom stifled an exclamation. In a chair at the wall sat a slender figure, rigidly still save for the trembling of the hands clasped across the bosom. Long waves of lustrous hair framed a face white as alabaster, and the large brown eyes were staring at Jepson with an expression of dread. There was a quiver in the distended orbs, as if a frightful recollection were lingering in their depths.

She shrank back against the chair as Jepson lumbered toward her. For a moment longer she remained motionless, then a long-drawn moan sounded in her throat, and with hands thrust out she sprang from the chair.

"You sha'n't take me back there!" she cried in tones edged with fury and terror. "I won't go back! I won't!"

"Easy now, lady! No use kicking up a fuss." Jepson roughly seized her arm, squeezed it until she uttered a sharp cry of pain, and started dragging her toward the door.

Then, of a sudden, the Phantom's fist shot out. Hard as steel, it delivered a stinging, crunching blow between Jepson's eyes, and the big brute dropped to

the floor like a dead weight. The girl stood immobile, staring at the twisted shape at her feet as if unable to understand what had happened. Then, very slowly, she raised her eyes until they met the Phantom's.

"You?" She spoke lowly, as if not quite recognizing him at first. Dazedly she drew her hand across her forehead. "Are you the Gray Phantom or——"

"I am the Gray Phantom. Don't you know me—Helen?"

She gazed at him long and searchingly. A soft gleam penetrated the film of terror in her eyes.

"Yes, you are the Gray Phantom." The words sounded hushed and strained. She came a step closer and placed her cold hand in his. There was a faint, tremulous smile on her lips. "Can you forgive me—for doubting you?"

"One little whisper from your lips makes everything right," he murmured softly, gently drawing her from the room and locking the door.

"I couldn't help it," she whispered. "Everything seemed to point to your guilt."

"It did," admitted the Phantom, "and I don't blame you. I suppose Granger lied to me when he told me he got into disgrace with the Duke's gang because of his refusal to abduct you. He's a skillful mixer of truth and fiction. What happened to you? Who kidnaped you?"

"One of Doctor Bimble's men, I suppose. I slipped out of the laboratory while you and the doctor were reading the paper. I was sick at heart. What you had told me while we were in the closet expressed my feelings. It seemed as though an idol had fallen off its pedestal and broken to bits, like ordinary clay.

Well, I had almost reached the front door when someone sneaked up behind me, thrust a black cloth down over my head and carried me upstairs. I must have been chloroformed, for shortly afterward I lost consciousness.

"The next day Granger called on me in the little room where they were keeping me. I think his object was to learn the location of Sea-Glimpse. I was—well, I was stubborn and wouldn't tell him. I received a shock the moment I saw him and noted his striking resemblance to you. All at once I knew he was the murderer. It came to me in a flash, and of a sudden I understood the meaning of Gage's statement."

"There must be such a thing as feminine intuition, after all," was the Phantom's comment. "Of course you told him to his face that he was the murderer?"

"I guess I did. The words seemed to tumble out of themselves. I think I told Bimble the same thing that evening. He seemed greatly alarmed."

The Phantom started. "Intuition is sometimes a very dangerous faculty," he murmured. "It is very likely to— But this is no time for talking. Jepson will be dead to the world for some little time, but the house is bristling with gangsters. I must get you out of here somehow."

He looked quickly about the dimly lighted basement. There was a window on each side, but both were covered by shutters and iron grilles, and the only exit seemed to be the stairs.

"What about yourself?" asked the girl.

"Oh," with a low laugh, "I have a task that yet remains to be finished. But you——"

Suddenly a little gasp slipped from the girl's lips, and she seized his arm convulsively. Her gaze was

rigid, and the Phantom looking in the same direction, saw Doctor Bimble standing in the stairs with a leveled pistol in his hand.

"Don't stir!" was the anthropologist's crisply spoken warning. "You will please note, my dear Phantom, that I'm not aiming at you, but at Miss Hardwick. She'll be dead the moment you make the slightest move!"

CHAPTER XXXI

AT BAY

THE Phantom scarcely breathed. He stood utterly still while the doctor came down the remaining steps and halted at the foot of the stairs. The pistol, pointed at Helen with a steadiness that bespoke a deadly aim, inspired him with a sense of awe a thousand times greater than if it had been leveled at himself.

The girl's hand was still on his sleeve, and, without looking directly at her, he knew that she was facing the menacing pistol without flinching. Her slight touch on his arm gave him a feeling of tenderness and strength. Already his wits were at work. In his hip pocket was the weapon he had taken from Granger, but he could not reach for it without jeopardizing the girl's life.

"Cruel trick you played on Granger," observed the doctor, standing a dozen feet away. "I don't know how you managed it, but you seem to have a special talent for such performances. Fortunately one of my men happened to enter the room in which you left the poor fellow, and he saw how things were. Well, Phantom, one thing is sure, you have played your last trick."

The Phantom maintained his attitude of immobility, but Bimble's words had given him an inward twinge. As far as he could see, the doctor had appraised the situation with accuracy. The windows,

with their shutters and iron bars, seemed impregnable. The murky walls and the low ceiling gave forth an impression of solidity that accentuated his sense of bafflement. The way to the stairs was barred by Bimble with his pistol, and the rooms and corridors above were swarming with the Duke's men. And meanwhile the Phantom dared not bend a muscle, for fear of causing Helen Hardwick's death.

"You will admit that you are very neatly cornered?" taunted the doctor.

"It would seem so," admitted the Phantom dryly, "but I have been cornered many times before. There's nothing very original in the situation."

"No, nothing except that you wriggled out of the others, while this one will hold you till I am through with you. Don't you think it would be the part of wisdom to submit and tell me what I want to know?"

"Never!" declared the Phantom with emphasis.

"Wouldn't it be better?" whispered Helen. "He'll kill us both unless we do."

"It's his intention to kill us, anyway," the Phantom whispered back. "The only reason he hasn't killed us already is that he hopes to persuade us to give him the information he wants. Afraid?"

"Not for myself. But you——"

"Then step behind my back as quickly as you can."

The girl looked up at him with an expression of uncertainty.

"Hurry!" whispered the Phantom. "It's our only chance."

She hesitated a moment longer; then, with the swift motion of a startled doe, she darted aside and stood at his back. The blue steel of the pistol barrel flickered for an instant as the doctor transferred his aim to the Phantom. Evidently the sudden movement had disconcerted Bimble.

"A fairly clever maneuver," he acknowledged, "but you have gained nothing by it."

"I am satisfied," declared the Phantom, his spirits rising again. "You can't reach Miss Hardwick with a bullet without first perforating me, and you have no intention of killing me until you have learned what you want to know. Eh, Bimble?"

The doctor's lips twisted into an ugly sneer. "We shall see," he muttered irately. "You are a clever man, Phantom, but your cleverness can't help you now."

He plucked a small metallic instrument from his vest pocket and brought it to his lips. Three short, shrill whistles pierced the silence. With a gratified grin on his lips the doctor restored the little metal tube to his pocket. The third blast had no sooner sounded than a tumult of discordant noises came from above. Bimble looked gloatingly at the Phantom as the sounds drew nearer. A man ran down the stairs, quickly followed by a second and a third. Others kept arriving, in groups of three or more, until the Phantom had counted twenty-four.

Like a great human fan, the crowd spread out in a triangle along the walls and about the foot of the stairs. As each man took his place in the line, the Phantom gave him a quick appraising glance. In their faces he read low cunning, brutish instincts, and stolid obedience to orders, but the keener wit and subtler intellect which the Phantom had always demanded of his men were lacking.

He read each face as if it were an open page, and finally his gaze rested on Doctor Bimble. The anthropologist was a craftier man by far than his subalterns, but at a glance the Phantom's keen eye picked out the weak spot in his moral fiber. Already a plan was forming in his mind. All he was waiting

for was a favorable combination of circumstances that would enable him to act.

The pistol in the doctor's hand was still pointing straight at the Phantom's chest. Bimble's expression was a repulsive mixture of cruelty and smug satisfaction.

"I trust you are convinced that resistance is useless, my dear Phantom," he declared in drawling tones. "There are more than twenty of us, as you see."

"Excellent!" remarked the Phantom. "I am glad to see so many of you here."

"Glad?" The doctor seemed a little dumfounded. "Why, pray?"

"Because having you all here in this room will make my task much easier."

"Your task?"

The Phantom laughed easily. "You must surely know that it is my intention to hand you all over to the police?"

Bimble stared. Twice he opened his mouth, but no words came. The Phantom's cool audacity seemed to have silenced his tongue.

"Are you crazy?" he asked at length.

"Never was saner in my life. It is my firm intention to turn every one of you over to the police. That's why I am glad to see so many of you gathered in one room."

He smiled as he spoke, but his heart was not in his smile. He was turning an audacious plan over in his mind, but he was not at all sure that he would have a chance to put it into execution. At his back he heard Helen's quick, nervous intakes of breath, and he turned his head slightly.

"The Gray Phantom's star has never yet set," he whispered.

A low, quavering laugh was the girl's response.

Bimble was still staring at him as if doubting his sanity. "*You* think you are going to turn *us* over to the police!" he exclaimed. "Ha, ha! Still in a jocular mood, I see. It won't last long. For the last time I ask if you will accept my terms."

The Phantom sent him a contemptuous glance. "One doesn't make terms with sneaking hyenas like you," he declared.

"Very well." Bimble ran his eye over the triangle of faces, and his gaze fell on a stout, tough-limbed man with a reddish face.

"Wilkes," he directed, "pull that devoted pair apart and carry the young lady to the room upstairs where the skeletons are. Be careful not to get in front of my pistol."

The stout man stepped out of the line. A coarse grin wreathed his face as he approached the Phantom and the girl from the side.

"Get back!" whispered the Phantom to Helen. Slowly, step by step, the two moved backward until Helen stood against the wall. Then the Phantom, looking straight into the muzzle of Bimble's pistol, reached back and wound his arms around the girl's slender waist.

"Pull us apart if you can," he told Wilkes as he interlocked his fingers behind Helen's back.

The stout man stopped and scratched his head, as if confronting a problem too complex for his wits to solve. A look of diffidence crossed Bimble's face as he noticed that the Phantom had once more balked him.

"Knock him down if you can't part them any other way," he commanded wrathfully. "Tap him on the head with something."

Chuckling, Wilkes drew a long revolver from his pocket, gripping it tightly by the barrel as he cau-

tiously approached the Phantom from the side. Helen gasped.

"Keep cool!" whispered the Phantom. "And whatever happens, stay right at my back."

He watched Bimble's pistol out of one eye, while with the other he followed Wilkes' movements. For an instant, as Wilkes swung the heavy weapon over his shoulder, he tensed his muscles for action. Then, with a motion so swift that the eyes of the onlookers could scarcely register it, his arm darted out and gripped the other's wrist just as the revolver was about to crash down on the Phantom's head.

Once more his arm shot out and with a quick and powerful wrench he swung Wilkes directly in front of him, coiling the fingers of one hand around the man's neck and windpipe. In almost the same instant he whipped out his pistol and, using the bulky figure of Wilkes as a shield, took aim and fired.

Bimble uttered a sharp yell of pain. The pistol dropped from his fingers, and he looked dazedly at his blood-spattered hand.

"Fairly good shot!" ejaculated the Phantom with a chuckle. At his back was Helen, trembling with excitement, and in front of him stood Wilkes, spluttering and gasping for breath as a result of the Phantom's clutch at his throat.

The whole episode had been enacted within the space of a few seconds. The Phantom had acted so swiftly and taken them all so completely by surprise that on one had had time to interfere. Now, before the men huddled against the wall and in front of the stairs could gather their wits, a powerful shove sent Wilkes sprawling headlong to the floor, and in another moment the Phantom had seized Helen's hand and made a rush for Bimble.

He snatched up the pistol the doctor had dropped as the bullet struck his wrist, and handed it to Helen.

"Shoot the first man who makes a move," he directed, "and shoot to kill!"

Helen looked into his cool, determined eyes, flashing with the ecstasy of combat. With a faint audacious smile on her lips, she drew herself up and handling the weapon with the sure touch of an expert, faced the staring and muttering crowd. For a few moments the men stood immobile, as if the swift succession of events had cast a numbing spell over their bodies and minds; then, with ominous grumblings and curses, a few of the more daring ones started forward.

In the meantime the Phantom had jabbed his pistol against Bimble's body with a force that brought a sickly groan from the doctor's lips. He glanced aside out of the corner of an eye as a crack and a gleam of fire issued from Helen's weapon. A bullet in the fleshy part of the hip had checked a furtive movement on the part of one of the gang, and instantly the others, impressed by the girl's exhibition of marksmanship, fell back.

The Phantom nodded approvingly. His glittering eyes and a smile on his lips gave no hint of what he felt.

"Let me warn you that Miss Hardwick is an expert," he remarked coolly. "She once got a perfect bull's-eye at six hundred yards."

The men looked at the girl, then at their ashen-faced and quavering leader. The Phantom pushed the pistol a little harder against the doctor's body.

"If anyone raises a hand against Miss Hardwick, you die instantly," he declared sharply. "I could kill you with no more compunction than if I were killing a rat."

The doctor gulped, and for the moment all his cunning seemed to have deserted him.

"Anyone who cares to fire a bullet at me is welcome to do so," the Phantom went on, speaking in quick accents that sounded like the clinking of metal. "My index finger, you will notice, is on the trigger. The slightest pressure will send a chunk of lead into your vitals. If I die, the muscular contraction that always accompanies sudden and violent death would be very likely to snap the trigger. You get the idea, I hope?"

It was evident that Bimble did. His absurdly thin legs wabbled as if he were in the grip of a great terror and the spasmodic twitching of his fingers indicated that this was a situation against which his habitual craftiness was helpless.

Helen stood at the Phantom's side, sweeping the crowd with cool, alert eyes, and holding the pistol in readiness for instant action. Her slim figure was erect, and there was a proud tilt to her head, as if the contagion of the Phantom's fighting spirit had gripped her. Again there were surly mutterings among the men, but with rare exceptions they were of the type that is impotent without a leader to urge them on.

Not a word came from Bimble's lips, but there was a look in his eye which told that the tentacles of his mind were reaching for a solution of the difficulty. The Phantom, keeping one eye on the doctor and the other on the crowd, detected a stealthy movement in the rear of the group. Someone had dropped to his knees and was crawling toward a huge box.

Instantly the Phantom saw the meaning of the stealthy movement. For a moment, as the crawling figure appeared around the edge of the group, he turned his pistol from the doctor, took a quick aim,

pressed the trigger, and again thrust the muzzle of his weapon against Bimble's diaphragm.

A cry told that the bullet had found its mark. As the smoke drifted toward the ceiling, the man rose to his feet with a look of distress in his face, caressing a portion of his arm as he slunk away toward the rear. A few of the others, who had sought to take advantage of the Phantom's temporary abstraction, fell back to their places.

The Phantom drew a long breath as he realized how narrowly Helen and himself had escaped disaster. They had the advantage for the present, but the slightest faltering might easily reverse the situation and release the pent-up savagery of their foes.

"Bimble," he remarked, "it would be extremely unfortunate for you if any of your men should get reckless. I see some of them are impatient. If anything happens to Miss Hardwick or me, you will be a dead man. Hadn't you better tell your friends to throw down their guns?"

The doctor glanced uneasily at his men. His looks told plainly that the Phantom had read him accurately, that there was nothing he valued quite so highly as he did his life, and that his swagger and bland assurance would wilt the moment he faced a personal danger. There was venon in his eyes, and his pale, distorted features bespoke impotent rage.

"Drop your guns," he commanded after another despairing look about the basement.

The men regarded him diffidently and did not move. Their faces showed that they were torn between the conflicting impulses of self-preservation and an ingrained habit of obedience.

"You're first." The Phantom pointed a finger at a tall, barrel-chested man at the end of the line. "Step forward and empty your pockets."

The Phantom was in a state of high tension. He was exercising a mastery of mind over the situation, but all might yet be lost if the man should refuse to obey and set the others an example of resistance.

"Miss Hardwick," he said quickly, realizing that each moment of delay might cost them their lives, "you will count five. If our friend at the end of the line has not emptied his pockets when you are through, shoot to kill."

The girl signified with a slight nod that she understood. As she began to count, her pistol was pointing straight at the man the Phantom had indicated. The fellow's sullen obstinacy yielded gradually to an overpowering respect for Helen's marksmanship, of which he had already witnessed an exhibition. Just before she reached "five," he lumbered forward and turned the lining of his pockets inside out. A knife, an automatic, and several other implements clattered to the floor.

"Now get back in the corner," commanded the Phantom pointing. He thrilled at the thought that the crisis was past and the victory almost won.

The second man hesitated only for an instant before he followed the example of the first. After that the process of disarming the gang went on swiftly and without interruptions. Man after man stepped out of the line, emptied his pockets, and joined the others in the corner. When the last man had divested himself of his belongings there was a small pile of oddly assorted articles in the middle of the floor.

The Phantom felt a little dazed, now that the tremendous tension was over. At last he lowered the pistol and turned to the girl. Her face was pale and

a little haggard but a smile of triumph hovered about her lips.

"You're the grandest little woman I ever knew," he declared feelingly.

"Oh, I don't know," she confessed a little wearily. "I don't think I could have stood it if you hadn't been so close to me. I felt as though you were holding me under a spell all the time."

The Phantom laughed. "Bimble, you have seen how one man, with the assistance of a plucky little woman, has vanquished a gang of twenty-five cutthroats and ruffians. The yellow streak in you made it fairly easy. I should like to see the Duke's face when he hears about this."

The doctor swallowed hard. His putty-hued face reflected the depths of mental agony.

"What—what are you going to do with us?" he inquired weakly.

"Precisely what I said I would do—hand you over to the police."

"Not that!" The doctor looked as though he had received a blow. "Listen! Down below, in the cellar, are several million dollars' worth of valuables. You can have it all if you will let us go."

"You're a rather poor sort, Bimble," said the Phantom contemptuously. "There isn't gold enough in the world to buy your freedom. To see you get your just deserts is worth more to me than all the millions the Duke and his gang ever stole."

The doctor staggered back against the wall, utterly dejected. Of a sudden the Phantom's expression of elation faded out and a worried look took its place. Where was Granger? The reporter had not been among those who had answered the doctor's summons, and the Phantom had seen nothing of him

since he left him chained to the wall in one of the upper rooms. Without doubt he had been released, for Bimble had said that a member of the gang had entered the room and found him shortly after the Phantom had started for the basement. His absence was somewhat disturbing, for the Phantom's task would not be finished until Granger had been caught.

Admonishing Miss Hardwick to keep an eye on the gang, he walked toward the farther wall. In the corner was a door which he had not seen before. It was locked, but he guessed that it led to the cellar in which the doctor kept the gang's treasures, and he noted that it was of hard and solid material and would resist almost any amount of pressure.

"Doctor," he said, walking back to where Bimble stood, "I'll trouble you for your bunch of keys."

With an air of a broken and defeated man, Bimble complied, and the Phantom made sure that one of the keys fitted the lock on the door leading to the cellar. Keeping one eye on the gang, he gathered the weapons they had discarded and placed them on the cellar stairs. Then he carefully locked the door and put the keys in his pocket. Motioning Helen to precede him, he backed up the stairs, covering the huddled and dejected group with his pistol till he reached the top. Here was another door, almost as substantial as the one communicating with the cellar. They stepped through, and the Phantom closed it and turned a key in the lock.

"Our precious friends are trapped," he remarked with a chuckle. "I'll wager they won't get out of that basement till the police drag them out. Now we must find Granger."

Passing swiftly down the hall, they opened one door after another, glancing quickly into each room

before proceeding to the next. Finally, on the floor above, they reached a door through which faint sounds came. For an instant the Phantom listened, then jerked the door open and entered. Taking in the scene at a glance, he drew his pistol.

"Hands up, Granger!" he commanded.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE OUTLAW

THE reporter's flushed face and the bottle at his elbow showed that he had been drinking. As the Phantom's sharp command rang out, his nervous fingers dropped the revolver which he had been pointing at a lanky, dull-faced figure standing against the wall.

"Culligore!" exclaimed the Phantom, "How did you get here?"

The lieutenant smiled. "Oh, I've been in this house for some little time—ever since that confounded "doc" shot me in the leg. He put me to bed and tied some ropes around me. How I got loose is a long story. I guess the "doc" would have taken a little more pains with the ropes if he had known that the wound in my leg wasn't so bad as I let on it was. I was strolling around a bit and finally I bumped into our friend Granger here. He's a real hospitable guy. Handed me a drink with one hand and flashed a gat on me with the other."

Granger, blinking his heavy eyes and staring blankly at the two intruders, leaned back against his chair. Evidently the weapon in the Phantom's hand convinced him that the game was up, for he made no move to recover the pistol he had dropped.

"He felt so sure I wouldn't get away from him alive that he told me the whole story," Culligore went on. "Of course, I had pieced together most

of it already from the scraps of fact I had. I've had my suspicions about Granger ever since the department turned him loose. I thought that was a big mistake, but I didn't have any evidence until just the other day. Then I searched his room, and what do you suppose I found?"

"What?" asked the Phantom and Helen in unison.

Culligore laughed softly. "It's queer how clever rascals like Granger always make some childish blunder. He didn't have sense enough to throw away the Maltese cross—that bit of phony jade that the murderer took from Gage's desk—but hid it in the false bottom of his trunk. Well, I guess that alone will give him a start toward the electric chair, though it isn't the only piece of evidence I have against him."

"Then, Culligore," asked the Phantom, "I suppose you're convinced I had nothing to do with the murders?"

The lieutenant grinned. "Well, you sized me up about right while we were stalling each other in the basement. From the first I didn't want to believe you were mixed up in the dirty deal. I had a sort of bet with myself that the Gray Phantom would always play the game according to the code. Anyhow, it wasn't long before I began to suspect that the whole thing was a frame-up. Granger has just told me all about it. Seemed proud of his achievement. The Duke had mapped out a nifty plan for Bimble to work on. None of the flossy details were omitted. Gage was to be murdered and you were to be the goat. If possible, the man put on the job was to be someone resembling you, so that if he were seen on or near the scene of the crime the evidence against the Gray Phantom would be strengthened.

"I guess you know what a thoroughgoing bunch the Duke's men are. They combed the country till they found a man looking like you. Granger seemed to fit the specifications, and they offered him a big bunch of money if he would do their dirty work. Granger tells me he has always had his eye on the main chance, that he was sick and tired of the newspaper grind, and was ready to do almost anything to get out of it. I suppose his conscience troubled him a bit, but the Duke's gang gave him all the whisky he wanted, for they knew he had the knack of keeping his mouth shut even when he was drunk, and liquor is a pretty good antidote for a troublesome conscience.

"The threatening letter was forged, of course. The job was done by one of the cleverest forgers in the world, a member of the Duke's organization. After the murder——"

"Not quite so fast," interrupted the Phantom. "How did Granger get into Gage's bedroom?"

"Through the tunnel connecting with Bimble's residence."

The Phantom looked puzzled. "But I satisfied myself that the revolving frame could not be manipulated from the outside."

"It wasn't," said Culligore. "Gage himself admitted his murderer. It wasn't the first time that he had received a visit from one of the gang that way, and he did not know that the organization had condemned him to death. So when Granger gave the customary signal, Gage thought somebody who didn't care to be seen was bringing him an important message."

"I might have guessed it," murmured the Phantom. "Evidently I was not cut out for a detective.

Granger, of course, made his escape through the tunnel after committing the murder?"

"He did, and that's what made the crime look so mysterious. It was part of the plan, for it convinced everybody that no one but the Phantom could have committed it. But Granger had no sooner committed the murder than he began to be nervous. Somehow he got it into his head that the housekeeper was wise to him. Maybe she was; we will never know that for sure, though I have a private hunch that Mrs. Trippe had guessed the truth. Anyhow, Granger decided that he wouldn't be safe unless the housekeeper was put out of the way. He locked her up in the bedroom; then went out for a drink. He was bent on murder, and he needed a bracer for his nerves. When he came back——"

"In the meantime," interrupted the Phantom, "Mrs. Trippe tried to escape by way of the revolving window frame. Probably she knew there was a hidden exit somewhere in the room. At any rate, she had discovered how to open it just before Granger returned. I was in the aperture in the wall and saw the murderer's hand as he drove the knife into her body. Granger either knew or guessed that I was there. He did not see me, but he heard the housekeeper addressing someone just before the blow was struck, and he probably surmised who it was. To make sure I wouldn't get him into trouble, he ran around to the Bimble residence and blocked the other end of the tunnel. But there is one thing I don't understand. How did it come about that Granger was suspected of treachery?"

"You have just told us that he tried to kill you," said Culligore. "Well, that was the reason. The doc had given strict orders that you were to be taken alive and were not to be killed under any circum-

stances. Granger violated those orders when he tried to smother you to death in the tunnel. Shortly after that he disappeared, and that made it look all the worse for him. The "doc" didn't know that you had kidnaped him. All he knew was that Granger had vamoosed, and he thought he was doing the gang dirt and pulling some kind of treacherous stuff."

"That explains the note Dan the Dope handed me," observed the Phantom. "Everything is clear except Pinto's part in the affair. His statement cleared up a good many things, but not all. For instance, he was startled when I showed him the ducal coronet. Tell me," and the Phantom lowered his voice as a new thought occurred to him, "is, or was, Pinto a member of the Duke's crowd?"

"Not exactly." Culligore spoke with a hesitant drawl. "I'll tell you something if you promise to let it go in one ear and out the other. For some time I've had a private tip to the effect that the Duke's outfit wanted someone on the inside of the police department. They made Pinto a pretty attractive offer, and Pinto nibbled at the bait. He might have swallowed it if the Gage murder hadn't happened along."

"No wonder he acted so shaky," murmured the Phantom. "Well, I am glad the ugly mess has been disposed of. "The wily old Peng Yuen must have had an inkling of the truth when he quoted something to me from one of the Chinese philosophers. I didn't get his meaning then, but I do now. Anyway," with a soft laugh, "the bloodstain has been washed from the Gray Phantom's name. There will never——"

Granger, who had been leaning back against his chair as if in a drunken stupor, made a sudden movement. The Phantom was about to interfere, but the

reporter was only pouring himself a drink from the bottle. He rose unsteadily and held the glass aloft.

"It was fun while it lasted," he declared thickly. "I'm going to have one more drink—just one. Here goes!"

He gulped down the contents of the glass, swayed for an instant and regarded the others with an odd expression. Then, before either of them could interfere, he picked up the pistol he had dropped upon the Phantom's entrance.

A crack sounded. Helen uttered a sharp cry, and Culligore limped toward the reporter's chair just as Granger went staggering to the floor.

"Killed himself!" muttered the lieutenant. "Shot himself through the heart. Well, that's one way of dodging the electric chair."

Helen shuddered convulsively and the Phantom led her gently toward the door. He drew the doctor's keys from his pockets and tossed them to Culligore.

"I forgot to tell you," he remarked in casual tones, "that Bimble and his gang are locked up in the basement. Miss Hardwick and I rounded them up and took their guns away from them while you and Granger were discussing the crime. I understand, too, that there's a large amount of swag salted in the cellar. It will be quite an important catch for you, Culligore, and ought to help toward promotion for you."

The lieutenant stared.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" he muttered at last.

The Phantom smiled. "I believe there are several outstanding charges against myself," he observed. "To arrest the Gray Phantom would be almost as big an achievement as the rounding up of the Duke's gang."

Culligore seemed to hesitate. "Well," with a broad grin, "I suppose I ought to pinch you, but my leg still hurts a bit and you can run a lot faster than I can. Anyhow, I'll get plenty of credit as it is. You two might as well go away. I'll wait ten minutes before I telephone headquarters."

"Thanks, Culligore."

He gripped the lieutenant's hand and held it while each man looked the other in the eye. Then he turned and led Helen from the room. In a little while they were out on the street, and her face brightened as the morning breeze fanned it. The Phantom hailed a passing taxicab.

For a time they sat silent, and there was a touch of reverence in the Phantom's attitude as he gazed at the girl.

"Helen!" he whispered.

The soft brown eyes looked into his own.

"Gray Phantom!" she murmured.

He found her hand and held it. "It was a great adventure—the greatest of my life. Who would ever have dreamed that the Gray Phantom would go to such extremes to clear himself in the eyes of a girl?"

She looked up again, and there was a warm, misty radiance in her eyes.

"Did my opinion of you really matter as much as that?"

"Why, of course; it meant everything to me. And Helen——"

There was a choking sensation in his throat. He turned his head and looked out through the window at a quiet street lined with brownstone fronts. He laughed sadly.

"I forgot for a moment that I am still a hunted man. I am still an outlaw, and all officers are not

as generous as Culligore. My past is hanging over me like a great black cloud. But perhaps some day——"

She smiled as he broke off. "Perhaps some day," she murmured, "the cloud will roll away."

His fingers tightened convulsively about her hand; then he opened the door and called to the chauffeur. The cab swerved up to the curb and stopped.

"Good-by, Helen."

Her lips trembled and for a moment she could not speak.

"Au revoir—Gray Phantom!"

He drew a long, deep breath as the cab glided away. He watched it till it was out of sight. There was a smile on his lips and his eyes held a tender light.

"Farewell, Brown Eyes," he said, half aloud. "Wonder if we shall meet again, and if—" He did not finish the thought, but smiled whimsically. "I must hurry back and see what I can do with my gray orchid."

Then he swung down a side street and walked briskly away, looking furtively to right and left with the habitual caution of hunted men.

THE END

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